



秋津透
Akitsu Toru
エルザ #2
Elsa #2



Illustration
Naora Yusuke 直良有祐

SQUARE ENIX.

GN
FRONT MISSION 4 エルザ #2
フロントミッション4 II
イラスト 直良有祐

スクウェア・エニックス

9784757512900

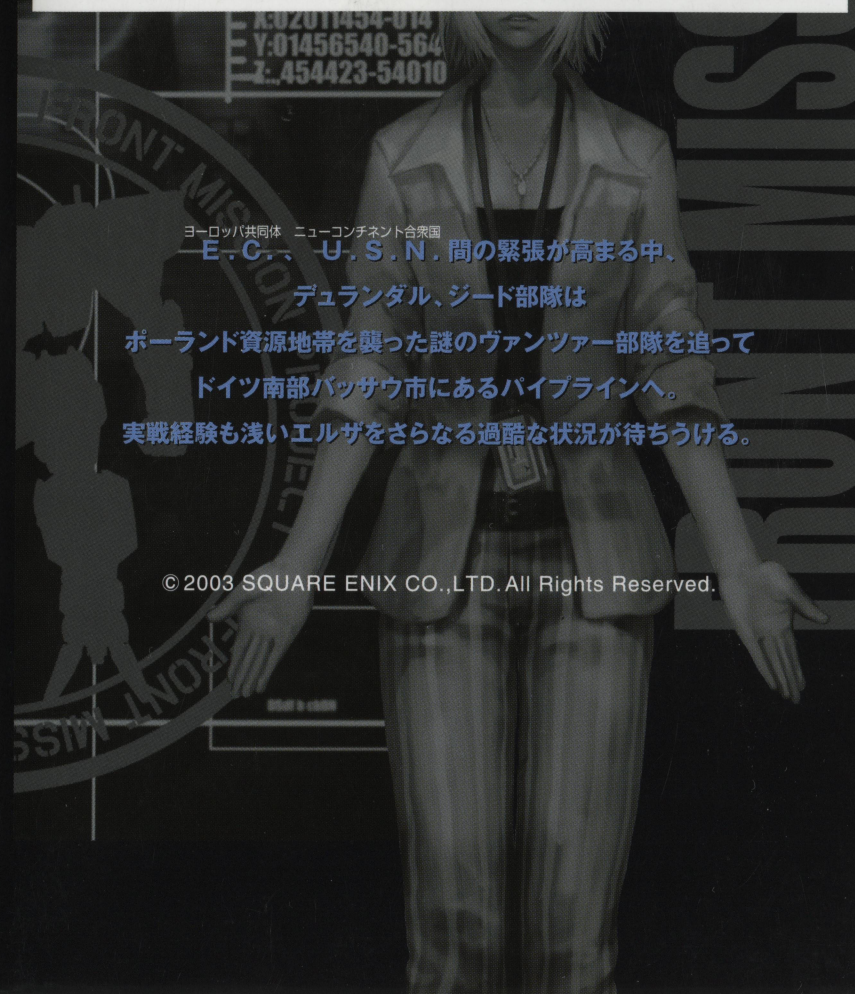
1920293009339

ISBN4-7575-1290-2

C0293 ¥933E

定価: 本体933円 + 税

SQUARE ENIX.



ヨーロッパ共同体 ニューコンチネント合衆国
E.C. U.S.N. 間の緊張が高まる中、
デュランダル、ジード部隊は
ポーランド資源地帯を襲った謎のヴァンツァー部隊を追って
ドイツ南部バッサウ市にあるパイプラインへ。
実戦経験も浅いエルザをさらなる過酷な状況が待ちうける。

© 2003 SQUARE ENIX CO.,LTD. All Rights Reserved.



GAME NOVELS

フロントミッション4 II

秋津透

エルザ #2
Akitsu Toru

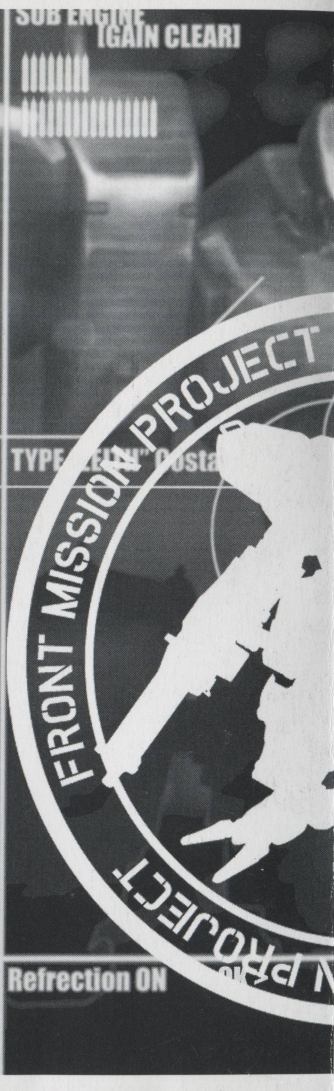
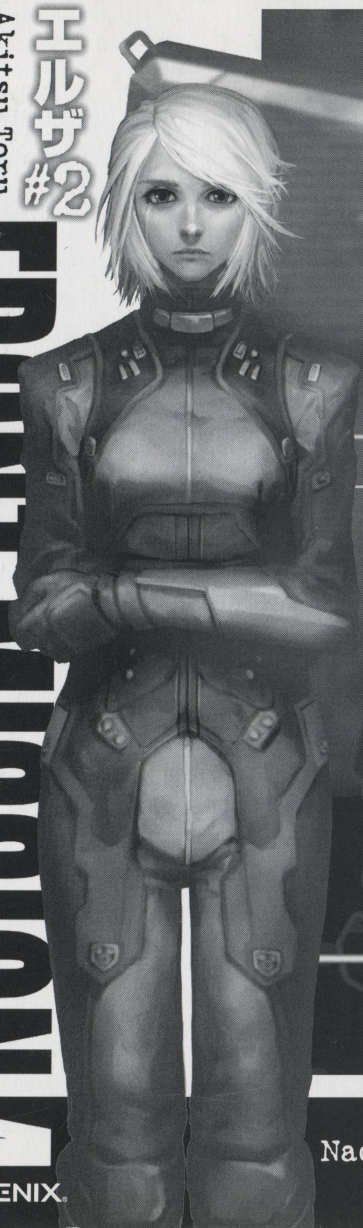


Illustration Naora Yusuke 直良有祐

SQUARE ENIX

GN
GAME NOVELS

フロントミッション4 II



秋津透
イラスト 直良有祐

スクウェア・エニックス



4 FRONT MISSION



GAME NOVELS

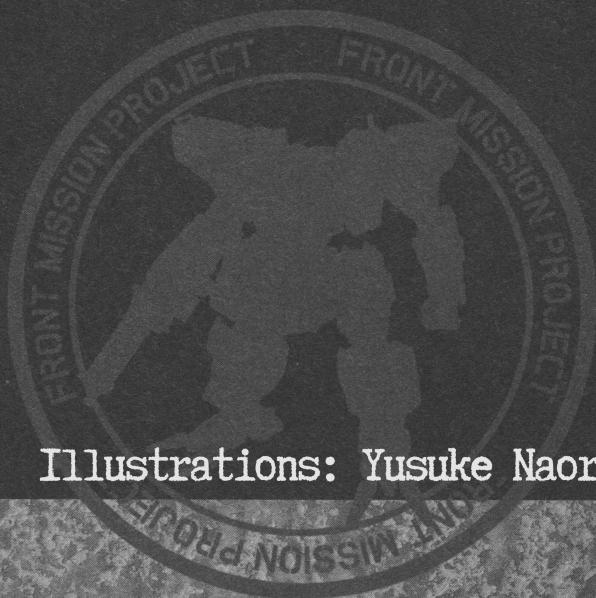
Front Mission 4 II

Elsa #II

Toru Akitsu

Illustrations: Yusuke Naora

FRONT MISSION 4



C O N T E N T S

MISSION 7

Bassau

7

MISSION 8

Near the Zaftra Border

49

MISSION 9

Nikolaev Port

85

MISSION 10

Iberia Megafloat

125

MISSION 11

Madeira Island

197

MISSION 12

Final Battle

231

Epilogue

284

C H A R A C T E

Dieter Bosch

A former German military officer skilled in strategic planning. A classmate of the Blauer Nebel commander Wagner from officer school. Not very active, with an easygoing personality. 34 years old.

Dieter Bosch

Beck Canova

Beck Canova

Former Italian soccer player. No military experience. Has a free-spirited and cheerful personality that dislikes following rules.

O T H E R S

Rolf Wagner

Rolf Wagner

Commander of the German Special Forces Blauer Nebel. 28 years old. Has a calm and composed personality.

Fredrick Lancaster

A freelance journalist investigating the German military base attack incident. Known for his scoop on the Sakata Industries "incident" during the Second Huffman Conflict.

Niklas Gleaser

Niklas Gleaser

Commander of the German Special Forces Blauer Nebel. A tough soldier with a strict personality.

Fredrick Lancaster

R S RANDALL

Zead Elger

Zead Elger

Commander of the Durandal combat unit, former British Army general with extensive combat experience. 45 years old. A polite and reliable man.

Elsa Eliane

Elsa Eliane

The main character of this story. A new recruit at the Durandal. Previously served in the French Wanzer unit. No real combat experience yet.

Latona Rodiona
Vasilev

Latona Rodiona Vasilev

A Wanzer pilot from the ZAFTRA military. Has a long military career and is strict with both herself and others. 28 years old.

Hermes Sturges

Durandal Information Analysis Officer. A mood-maker in the team, excelling in computer-based information processing. 20 years old. Optimistic personality.

Hermes Sturges

MISSION 7:

Bassau

"We have entered German airspace. So far we have not received any communication from anywhere accusing us of intrusion," Captain Robert announced in a slightly lower voice.

"Apparently the radar jamming device is working fine."

"Then the next question is how close we can get to the target point," Hermes, who was checking the sensor, replied as Zead dazed.

"The entrance to the Bassau pipeline will soon be within range of our detectors. Once we do, we should be able to get a rough idea of the level of security in place."

"In the first place, if they were going to the trouble of guarding an abandoned pipeline, that alone seems suspicious enough," Bosch points out with a wry smile.

"But that doesn't mean we can say anything more than that there are suspicions."

"If all we're trying to do is present a suspicion, let the likes of Frederick Lancaster do it. If we're going to take the risk and go in, we need solid evidence or it won't be worth it," Latona groaned with disapproval, and Hermes spoke up nervously.

"The sensor has responded! Several large armed Wanzers have been deployed on the ground around the pipeline entrance!" Hermes continued, eyes on the monitor.

"Identification signal confirmed! Wanzer belongs to the German Army, Blauer Nebel!"

"So Blauer Nebel was on guard after all," Zead asked Hermes with a low growl.

"What about reactions from things other than the Wanzers? Have you noticed any signs that a large number of explosives have been planted?"

"It doesn't seem to be within the range or scale that can be read by the transport plane's sensors," Hermes replied, and Zead nodded vigorously.

"Very well, then we will perform an airborne landing from directly above the pipeline entrance, crash into the control facility, and capture evidence. Captain, I'd like you to select the course, adjust the speed and altitude, and assist with the airborne landing."

"Understood. This time, I won't make a mistake like getting hit by a lucky hit and having to make an emergency landing," Captain Robert replied, and Zead nodded seriously.

"This time, unlike in Poland, we are invaders and the ground is enemy territory. If we are forced to make an emergency landing, we must prepare to be captured. Please be extremely careful."

"Yeah, I know," the captain nodded, looking a little annoyed. Then, Zead turned to us and said,

"Everyone, board your Wanzers and prepare for airborne drop!"

"Got it!" Latona, Bosch, and I responded almost reflexively, but Hermes, who wasn't good with military ceremonies, had a slightly complicated look on her face. However, in the next moment, all of the members, including Hermes, ran at once to the hangar. "Countdown, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, descend!" At Captain Robert's signal, I launched the Wanzer into the air. I had done the same thing just the other day in the new resource area of Poland, but this time, there was no artillery fire attacking the transport plane from the ground.

"What is your plan, Blauer Nebel? Isn't it common sense for the defending side to attack the mothership with all their might against an airborne force?" I was a little suspicious, but I landed on the ground and, together with Latona, who had descended ahead of us, kept a watchful eye on the surroundings. Then, from the headset, Hermes' voice came in an urgent tone.

"Latona! Elsa! There's no need to wait for those behind us. Can you hurry to the gray building on the left ahead? That's the pipeline control facility! There are two Wanzers on guard in front of the building, so destroy them as quickly as possible and take control of the area!"

"Leader, is it okay to follow Hermes' orders?" Latona asked in a brusque tone, and Zead replied immediately.

"Please do so. If there are any problems, I will fix them."

"Roger that. I'll ask the others to provide support quickly," I said, and Latona's unit took off towards the building indicated by Hermes, and I immediately followed suit. And the moment Brown and Fu-bel's Wanzers in front of the building came into view, an explosive cannon was fired from the other side.

"Tsk! We were waiting for you!" Latona clicked her tongue as she swiftly dodged the shells. Looking, it seemed that the enemy Wanzers in front of the building had one equipped with an explosive shell cannon, and the other equipped with dual weapons. It was easier to deal with than an attack with missiles or rockets, but it was a difficult combination to attack if they were committed to defense. Moreover, the building was surrounded by a wire fence on a concrete base, so although you could see through, it was impossible to approach all at once. It was a structure that was advantageous for the defending side.

"The only unobstructed route in is the front gate. If we try to force our way in and get shot at by the explosive shell cannon, it'll be difficult to dodge." It seemed Latona had the same feeling as me, and she groaned in annoyance as she quickly circled around the blind spot of the explosive shell cannon-equipped aircraft.

"In fact, it would be better to break down the fence and enter from the side.

However, in that case, we wouldn't be able to send two planes in at the same time."
"We can't enter at the same time, and the unit that goes in first won't be able to use link and will be attacked in pairs. That's way too dangerous. We should wait for the missile-equipped unit to arrive," I replied, and Zead's voice interrupted from the headset.

"Elsa's judgement is correct. Don't try any unnecessary attacks. Wait for me to catch up."

"Huh? You mowed down so many Wanzers at the old castle base, yet you can't attack with equal numbers, two against two?" Latona yelled at Hermes, who sounded surprised.

"Battle isn't about arithmetic! Attacking an enemy that has the advantage on the ground will only result in pointless losses!"

"Okay, I get it! Let's hurry up and meet up as soon as we can... whoa!" Hermes' voice suddenly cracked, and Latona and I shouted at the same time.

"What's wrong?"

"We were hit by an armor-piercing cannon from the ground. Captain Robert quickly increased his altitude and managed to dodge, but we need to regain our position before we can airdrop again," Zead explained calmly.

"Hermes and I are the only ones left on the transport. Bosch has landed safely. The three of you need to assess the situation and act accordingly to see if you can take control of the control facility. However, don't push yourself too hard."

"Understood," Latona replied in a bitter tone and told me.

"If we hesitate too much, enemy Wanzers will gather around us and the situation will get worse. When Bosch arrives, we'd better consider charging in forcefully."

"That's right," I nodded, as Bosch's machine rushed in from behind. It was a hybrid Wanzer, just like the one I was using, with its Tatou arms replaced with Cicada mouths to increase the accuracy of its gunfire, but it was equipped with two machine guns. Compared to mine, which was equipped with a machine gun and a shotgun, the power and versatility when firing simultaneously was significantly lower, but in return it was much easier to handle.

"Is it done?"

"The only way in is through the front gate. If you enter through there you'll be a target for sniping," Latona explained briefly to Bosch.

"But if we destroyed the fence to create an entrance, we'd be targets while we were working. Plus, if Elsa and I split up, we wouldn't be able to use our links and we would be at risk of being taken out one by one, so I decided that."

"I see," Bosch replied in his usual nonchalant tone.

"If that's the case, then a countermeasure is in sight. I'll destroy the fence and create a diversion, and you guys will seize the opportunity to charge in head-on. The timing is up to you."

"Okay, let's do that," Latona replied immediately, guiding the Wanzer forward. I followed soon after, but the Bosch plane went around to the side on its own and fired its machine gun at the base of the fence. Then the plane equipped with an explosive shell began attacking the Bosch plane through the fence. The Bosch plane quickly dodged and continued its work of destroying the fence. Then, as the plane equipped with an explosive shell fired a second shot at the Bosch plane, Latona told me.

"Now! Let's charge in!"

"Now!" We sent the Wanzer into the front gate at full speed. Then, as if it had been waiting for us, the explosive shell equipped machine turned its gun towards us. The enemy was no fool. If you see the invasion force split into two, with one machine breaking down the fence and the other moving towards the gate, you can easily imagine that the one breaking the fence was a diversion, and the two machines that had gone around to the gate were waiting for an opportunity to break in. But even so, the Blauer Nebel explosive shell equipped machine launched an attack towards the Bosch machine. Even if it was a diversion, did they think that if the fence was broken, it would be troublesome later? Or did they deliberately show an opening to lure it in, and were confident that they could kill it by letting it break in through the gate? Judging from the quickness of the response, I think it was the latter, but the speed of the Latona machine's charge completely messed up the calculations of the explosive shell equipped machine.

"Too slow!" Before the enemy Wanzer could aim its explosive cannon, Latona's machine furiously closed the distance. The shells, fired in a panic, veered off in a completely wrong direction without the enemy Wanzer even bothering to dodge. Then, a dual-weapon equipped Wanzer jumped out from behind the explosive cannon-equipped machine, and I fired my machine gun at it, partly as a warning. At the same time, Latona's machine slammed its pile bunker into the arm of the explosive cannon-equipped machine, and my machine, which was within range of the linked attack, automatically fired its shotgun. This merciless two-stage attack blew the explosive cannon-equipped machine's weapon along with its arm, and although it wasn't disabled, it was completely rendered incapable of fighting and fell over. Meanwhile, the dual-weapon equipped machine that had dodged my machine

gun fire seemed to have decided that it was impossible to defend the situation after seeing its wingman easily rendered incapable of fighting. Firing wildly from a distance, they began to move slowly towards the gate, mainly keeping Latona's unit in check, but then Bosch's unit stopped destroying the fence and turned towards the gate, and that was it. Before Latona could even charge in and hit it, the two-weapon unit was instantly put out of action by a pincer attack from myself and Bosch's front and back, and the pilot was ejected. Meanwhile, the former explosive shell cannon-equipped Wanzer, which had lost its weapon and arm, was unable to get up properly and was half-crawling as it desperately ran in the opposite direction. If it was just to get away, it would have been much quicker to get off the Wanzer and run away, but until it had stopped functioning and was ejected, it probably didn't even think of abandoning its unit. Honestly, I can understand how it felt. In any case, this operation was not one in which we would go out of our way to chase and capture an enemy that had lost its fighting power and was fleeing. As soon as the dual-weaponized machine became inoperable, Latona's voice came through the headset and spoke to Bosch.

"For now, we've eliminated the guard Wanzers. Now we need to enter the control facility and neutralize any remaining enemies, then check to see if there's anything that could serve as evidence, but enemy Wanzers are gathering all around, so we can't all get off the Wanzers."

"That's right. I'll enter the building first, so you guys stay in your Wanzers and keep guard in front of the building. If there are any enemies remaining inside the building and I find it too much for me to handle on my own, I'll contact them and ask for backup," Bosch replied immediately, to which Latona replied in a slightly complicated voice.

"It would be a great help if you could do that. However, don't push yourself to do it alone."

"Oh, I'll be very careful," Bosch replied nonchalantly as he parked the van in front of the entrance to the control facility, got off surprisingly quickly, and went inside the building. Then Latona contacted Zead.

"The Wanzer stationed in front of the control facility has been eliminated. There has been no damage on our side. Bosch is currently inside the building. How is the situation over there?"

"We managed to make the airborne landing safely, but we've ended up engaged in combat with several Wanzers on the ground. We'll do our best to repel them and head in the direction to join you, so please wait a little longer," Zead replied calmly,

but Latona asked in a sharp tone.

"Are you and Hermes okay with it being just the two of you? If you need reinforcement, I'll call back Bosch and we'll all move to reunite over there."

"No, it's okay. I think the enemy will turn on you as well, but please manage to secure the control facility until we join up," said Zead, and immediately after he finished communicating, it was Bosch who contacted him.

"The control facility is empty. I tried fiddling with the terminals, but the data related to the pipeline's operation has already been erased and I can't read it with my technology. If Hermes can investigate, they might be able to find something."

"I see. In that case, we must secure the control facility until Leader and Hermes join us. Hurry back to the front of the building and get into your Wanzer," Latona said, dazzled, half talking to herself.

"In a mission like this, where we're forcibly invading enemy territory, it's not ideal to have to stay still and secure a fixed position. We need to move around as much as possible and not let the enemy figure out where we are, otherwise we'll be unable to deal with enemy reinforcements gathering from all around."

"That's certainly true, but speaking specifically of this case, I don't think Blauer Nebel can afford to call in for reinforcements so carelessly. Why were they going out of their way to guard a pipeline entrance that wasn't even being used? If the German military police find out, they'll be in a pretty tough position," I pointed out, and she replied with a low chuckle.

"Oh, that's right. They wouldn't want the whole German army in the area to be mobilized and surround us. But on the other hand, if the German military police were to intervene, we would most likely be arrested without question as armed criminals caught in the act of trespassing. Even if the Blauer Nebel guys were put in a difficult position, it wouldn't be worth it at all."

"I guess we both want to avoid a big fuss," I said as if it was none of my business, to which Latona replied with a bit of sarcasm.

"Whether it's the German army or any other EC nation's army, to the eyes of ordinary soldiers who simply follow orders, there's no doubt that Durandal and Blauer Nebel are complete deviants. Although, I don't know if the Blauer Nebel guys are aware that they are deviants as soldiers."

"That's right. Looking at people like Major Wagner and Captain Dranz, far from being deviants, I think they actually believe themselves to be true soldiers," Latona said, her voice suddenly becoming more firm.

"Oh, this is no time for chatter! Blauer Nebel's Wanzer has arrived!"

"Okay. Looks like we made it in time," said the Bosch robot as it came forward from the front door, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Even if we weren't linked, in this case, having two or three robots on our side made all the difference, and it's no exaggeration to say it like heaven and earth.

"There are four enemy Wanzers in the effective range of my detector, on the other side of the gate in front of me. Two equipped with dual weapons, and one equipped with a machine gun and a shield. There don't seem to be any enemy planes with long-range weapons. And, at the moment, there's no sign of these four planes charging through the gate. It seems they're waiting for others to follow."

"Hmm, if they're not going to charge in, then there's no need for us to leave," Latona replied to Bosch's observation in a tone that sounded quite natural.

"Until the leaders join us, we should buy ourselves some time if we can. There's no need to rush into an attack."

"Yes, that's right," Bosch agreed as if it were a given, but then his voice suddenly became tense.

"New forces have appeared from the west. Two units, no, one large one. Their armaments are still unknown, but judging from their power output, it wouldn't be surprising if they were equipped with missiles or something."

"A large missile-equipped aircraft, you say? If something like that really does appear, we can't just stay at the base. We have no choice but to jump out, prepared to take some damage, close in quickly and destroy it. Are you sure?" Latona asked in an urgent tone, and Bosch responded after a short pause.

"No, sorry for scaring you. It doesn't seem to be a missile-equipped machine. It's large, but its movement speed is strangely fast. It seems to be a high-powered, heavily armored machine for front-line commanders."

"Hmm. So it's the type that can lead a unit without losing speed even with heavy armor. It may be a little better than the large missile-equipped machines, but it's still a troublesome opponent," Latona growled bitterly, and a large machine appeared on my sensor, which had a slightly narrower effective range than Bosch's. Indeed, the reaction was undoubtedly that of a large machine, but it was approaching at the same speed as a normal Wanzers, or perhaps even faster. Then Bosch glared slightly.

"The frontline commander of Blauer Nebel? Perhaps it's Wagner."

"If Wagner is the pilot of that large aircraft, is there anything special we need to be careful of?" Latona asked, and Bosch replied in a low voice.

"Among the Wanzers pilots I know, Wagner is one of the best close-range marksmen."

He's not bad at sniping from long distances either, but he's frighteningly skilled at reading his opponent's movements at close range and firing a bullet in the direction they dodge. That's why some people have said with a straight face that if you end up in a close-range firefight with Wagner, it might be better to just focus on attacking rather than trying to dodge."

"Hmmm. Maybe that's a good match for me." Latona, who specializes in point-blank attacks with melee weapons, laughed, but I had a bad feeling about it. Compared to Latona and Bosch, I have far less combat experience, but I am quite confident in my ability to see through and dodge enemy attacks in an instant. In the French Wanzers unit, there was not a single pilot who could hit me with close-range fire, as long as we were paired together and using the same aircraft. After transferring to Durandal, I ended up fighting against unknown raiding forces and the elite German Blauer Nebel, but the only time my aircraft was hit by gunfire was when my arm was hit by an aircraft equipped with a long-range armor-piercing shell, and I was able to dodge all close-range fire from machine guns and shotguns. Of course, I think it was a result of the situation and luck, but even so, it is objectively true that I am good at intuitive evasion. However, Wagner seems to be able to read the opponent's evasive moves and nullify them. This makes him, in a sense, my nemesis. Of course, if I knew in advance that he was going to be like that, I might be able to deal with him somehow, but it's difficult to consciously control an instant evasion, and if I think about something, my movements will be slower no matter what.

"Well, it hasn't been decided yet that Wagner will be the pilot of the large aircraft. At this point, I don't have time to think about unnecessary things." I said nothing, dazed, as I kept my eyes on the large Wanzer displayed on the detector. The large Wanzer approached the control facility in a straight line, but soon after it came into view over the fence, it suddenly changed direction.

"Hmm? Isn't this thing going to join up with the four Wanzers in front of the gate?" Latona groaned suspiciously, and Bosch quickly replied.

"No, even if we joined up, we wouldn't be able to charge in all at once, so it would just get in the way of our allies. The larger plane is probably planning to charge in alone from the spot where I half-destroyed the fence."

"I see. So, of course, the plan is for the guys at the gate to rush in at the same time and attack from both sides. I won't let them do that!" The Blauer Nebel guys probably don't know this, but we used almost the same strategy to defeat the enemy defending the control facility a while ago. That's why Latona's reaction was so quick. "I'll destroy the four planes in front of the gate one by one!"

"Hurry!" Latona and I ran furiously to the gate and jumped out. Bosch followed after a short gap, keeping an eye on the large machine that had broken through the fence to the side and was about to invade. The four enemy Wanzers all fired their machine guns at Latona's machine, which was charging forward with incredible force, but instead of trying to dodge, she blocked the bullets with the shield on her right arm. Of course, no matter how much she blocked them with the shield, damage to her arm was unavoidable, but she must have quickly decided that it would be more advantageous to force her way through the gate and close the gap, rather than taking the time to forcibly avoid them as the gate narrowed. Then, having closed the gap in an instant, Latona's machine slammed its pile bunker into the nearest machine equipped with two weapons. The enemy machine was blown backwards by the force of the blow, colliding with its wingman and falling over. I then fired my machine gun and shotgun at the same time, without giving them time to get up, and both of them were rendered inoperable and their pilots were ejected. Meanwhile, the Latona attacked the third enemy Wanzer, which was unexpectedly tough. It was not equipped with two weapons, but had a machine gun on its left arm and a shield on its right arm, which was a defensive-oriented equipment, and it was usually used by inexperienced soldiers, but it was quite impressive, skillfully using the shield to tenaciously fend off the Latona's onslaught. Furthermore, the fourth enemy machine, equipped with the same equipment, worked together so well that I thought they were linked, holding back the Latona and preventing it from advancing. As expected of Blauer Nebel, it is worthy of being called the strongest Wanzer unit in the German army, or rather, the strongest Wanzer unit in the EC. However, if I hesitated here, I would be pincered by the large machine coming around from behind. I knew the danger, but I forced my way in between the two enemy Wanzers. One of the Wanzers fired its machine gun, but he saw it coming at the last moment and dodged it with minimal movement. He was only able to pull off such a feat thanks to his Tatou, which was far more agile than a normal Wanzer.

"Now!" Quickly dodging the enemy's attack, I forcefully turned my unit half a turn and fired my machine gun. Even if I hit it, it wouldn't have been fatal, but both enemy units frantically dodged, and their coordination clearly fell apart. Latona's unit took advantage of the opening and struck the enemy unit with its pile bunker, destroying the enemy unit's machine gun along with its arm. Having lost its main weapon, the enemy unit still tried to slam its remaining shield into Latona's unit, but as she specializes in close combat, there was no way that she could withstand such an attack. I easily dodged it and jumped on the last unit, piercing it deeply with the

pile bunker, almost to the center of the fuselage, near the computer core. Unlike the mysterious attacking force, the Wanzers used by Blauer Nebel were basically units whose performance and structure were already known, so Latona knew exactly where to aim in order to stop the computer without harming the pilot. Of course, even if you know the enemy's weak spots, it takes extraordinary skill to attack them accurately. However, it's too early to take a breather. A large Wanzer has broken through the fence and circled around from the side of the facility, charging towards us. With the four allies that were supposed to coordinate and pincer attack easily destroyed one by one, one would normally expect them to retreat for the time being, or at least hesitate a little, but there was no sign of that at all.

"Here it comes!" the Bosch machine at the very rear of the group warned, firing its machine gun. The large machine, either not agile enough to dodge, or like Latona earlier, not intending to dodge from the start, took the Bosch's attack head on, but continued charging forward unfazed, firing wildly from the two large machine guns it held in both hands.

"Waah!" The Bosch machine dodged in a big way that seemed a little dramatic. But the next moment, right next to where he had dodged, a bullet from a large machine gun with tremendous power exploded. If he had made even the slightest dodge movement, it would have been hit perfectly and rendered completely inoperable.

"If they're swinging around such powerful weapons, and they're carrying two of them, there's no way I can defend myself with a shield." One hit would definitely blow the whole arm away. No, if it was just the arm, it would be a stroke of luck, but in all likelihood the damage would extend to the torso and render it inoperable, I thought bitterly as the Latona machine circled around in the opposite direction to the Bosch machine. Of course, I followed the Latona machine, which I was linked to. However, the large machine was firing its machine gun and chasing the retreating Bosch machine. It's true that if the enemy is dispersed, it's a common tactic to take them out one by one starting from the weakest, but that's not how it felt. There was an air of obstinacy, as he dodged a hit that should not have been dodged. I thought that the pilot of the large machine must be Wagner, since he was so confident in his own shooting. And Bosch continues to dodge the relentless fire of the large machine that is chasing him, literally by the skin of his teeth, without metaphor or exaggeration. He called Wagner an expert in close-range shooting, but it seems that Bosch himself is an expert at dodging, surpassing even that expert. Like me, this may be possible because he is piloting a Tatou, the most agile Wanzer available on the commercial market, but even so, it is an impossible feat unless the pilot has

advanced skills and natural instincts. At least, if you ask me if I can do it, I'm not confident. And while Bosch continues to dodge with all his might, Latona and I close the gap from behind the large machine. However, the pilot of the large machine that seemed to be Wagner was not so easygoing that he would let us perform a link attack as it was.

"Uwah!" The large machine suddenly turned around and fired the large machine gun on its left hand. It was a careless and cold movement, as if it was shooing away a clinging insect, but its aim was terrifyingly accurate, and Latona's machine dodged in an instant, only for the attack to be read and attacked. It reflexively defended with a shield, so it was not disabled in one hit, but its right arm was completely destroyed along with the shield.

"Latona!" At that moment, unable to grasp the extent of the damage to the Latona's aircraft, I instinctively ran over to it. Thinking about it calmly later, I realized that even if the damage to my wingman had been serious, there was nothing I could have done to fix it, so the right thing to do would have been to retreat quickly and get out of the range of the larger aircraft, but that is purely hindsight. As a result, I ended up jumping out in front of the large aircraft that was pointing its large machine gun at me.

"Fire!" In reality, it was less than a second, but I felt the muzzles of the two large machine guns pointed right at me, and my whole body froze. On the one hand, I felt that I had to dodge, but on the other hand, I was certain that even if I did, he would read my plan. Regardless of whether the opponent was Wagner or not, Latona had been read all the way. I did not have the skill of Bosch, who was able to surpass that read and dodge.

"Well then!" In the next moment, I advanced towards the large aircraft, firing both my machine gun and shotgun at the same time. With a normal Wanzer, it might be possible to disable it with one hit, but the armor of the large aircraft was apparently very sturdy, and although I was sure I had hit it, it didn't seem to have done any noticeable damage. Then, without a moment's hesitation, the large machine gun aimed at me opened fire with a thunderous bang. I'm not sure whether it read my attempt to dodge unconsciously, or whether it was completely unsuccessful, but in the end, I took a direct hit. Before I could even think that I'd been defeated, all of the display screens turned an eye-burning crimson and a harsh, synthesized warning voice rang out from the headset.

"Emergency! Emergency! Ejection!" When this happens, there is nothing the pilot can do. I was caught up in a surreal sensation, like I was having a nightmare, and

the cockpit was automatically ejected from the Wanzer, which had become inoperable and collapsed. Thinking about it, I have never faced a situation where the Wanzer I was riding in was destroyed and I had to eject it for an emergency escape. Well, that's because I don't have much experience in actual combat, but in any case, it's true that this was my first experience of being ejected in actual combat, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't shocked in many ways. However, I'm originally the type of person who prefers to move my body rather than think about it when I'm in a difficult situation, and I was trained to the point of being sick of how to move my body in an emergency escape while I was in the French army. As the ejected cockpit landed on the ground with a heavy thud, I quickly removed the shock-resistant belt, unplugged the headset connection cord from the adapter, opened the hatch, and jumped out of the cockpit. But the next moment, I was forced to stop all movement, as if frozen at cryogenic temperatures. A large Blauer Nebel Wanzer approached with an intimidating operating sound, and aimed its large machine gun directly at me.

"Do not move. If you do, I will shoot you immediately. This is your final warning. This is not just an empty threat."

"...Wagner," I groaned softly, unable to move. The cold voice announcing through the large aircraft's external loudspeaker was undoubtedly that of Commander Blauer Nebel, Major Wagner. Wagner continued speaking in a monotone.

"To the Durandal Wanzer pilots who have illegally entered the pipeline facility, I am calling for you to immediately exit your Wanzers, drop your weapons, and surrender. If you surrender, your lives are guaranteed. If you resist, we will consider you armed terrorists and will shoot all of you, including the pilots who escaped from their Wanzers."

"Shoes..." I gritted my teeth, feeling an intense sense of frustration and defeat that I hadn't felt when my Wanzer was destroyed. I had given the enemy their strongest trump card: a hostage. I thought about just running away, prepared to be shot, but if I moved, Wagner would shoot without hesitation, and even if the hostage was gone, it wouldn't really improve the situation. However, from the moment the large machine gun was pointed at me, my legs and body had been paralyzed, so I couldn't actually run away. It's a pathetic story, but you can't really understand how terrifying it is to have a weapon pointed at you by a Wanzer while you're still bare-bodied, unless you've been on the receiving end of it. Then, a loud clang rang out from the other side. The Bosch machine threw away both of the machine guns it had been equipped with.

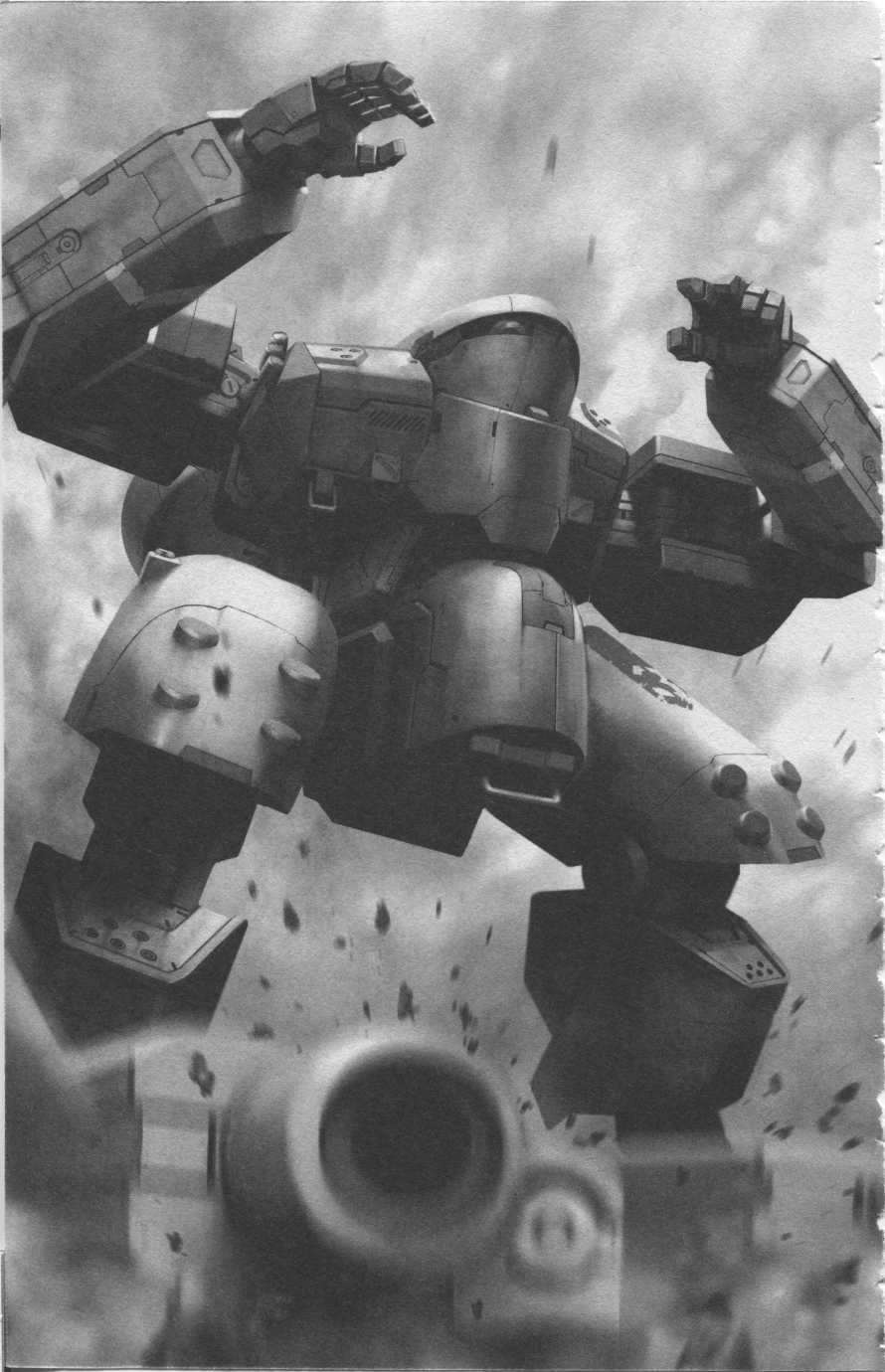
"Is this okay, Major Rolf Wagner?"

"Is that voice Dieter Bosch? I heard that you left the military and joined Durandal, but I never thought I'd meet you here..." Wagner's voice showed a hint of human emotion, but he quickly returned to his cold tone as he made his announcement.

"Well, then, I will not disarm you. Get out of your Wanzers immediately. And that pile bunker-equipped unit over there... Argh!" At that moment, a missile flew in and hit Wagner's machine directly, creating an incredible roar and blast. The impact freed me from my paralysis, and without even understanding what had happened, I half-rolled and dove into the shadow of the ejected cockpit. I had no intention of running away from Wagner, it was a completely absent-minded act. Thinking back, if Wagner had fired his large machine gun at the same time the missile hit, I would have been blown to pieces along with the cockpit, like a beehive. But fortunately, Wagner did not shoot me. Was it because I was attacked unexpectedly and did not have the time to do so? Or was it because the direct hit from the missile had damaged my weapon and arm, preventing me from firing? Or did he avoid murder under unclear circumstances out of his pride as a soldier who always does things the right way? No one knows for sure except Wagner himself. And without a moment's hesitation, Latona's plane charged forward with the force of a wounded beast. Wagner's plane fired its large machine gun wildly, but it seemed to have serious damage somewhere, and it couldn't aim properly and couldn't hit its target. Latona quickly closed the distance and rammed Wagner's plane at the same speed. At the moment of impact, it swung its left arm and slammed the pile bunker into the fuselage with all its might. I described it as if I had seen it, but in reality, I was crouching low in the shadow of the ejected cockpit, holding my head in my hands. The roar of the two Wanzers fighting so close to each other was overwhelming to the living ears, like a rumbling or thunder, and I had no time to imagine what was going on. When the sounds of the fierce battle finally died down and everything around us became quiet, I cautiously rose from the shadow of the cockpit. I saw the huge body of Wagner's machine, slumped over and at its side, the Latona machine, black smoke rising from its destroyed right arm. A little further away, the undamaged Bosch machine was standing, its machine gun aimed.

"Elsa! Are you okay?" Latona called out over the external loudspeaker, apparently having noticed me.

"I'm fine! I'm not hurt anywhere!" I tried to respond, but the external listening device on the Wanzer wasn't accurate enough to pick up a living voice. Realizing this, I waved my hand vigorously towards the Latona.



"Ah, it seems you're safe. That's a relief," Latona exclaimed, and then Bosch spoke nonchalantly.

"Zead and Hermes are getting very close. It goes without saying, but the missiles just now were fired by Zead at their maximum range. Also, when Wagner escaped from the Wanzer, I had abandoned my machine gun, so he was able to get away. Of course, taking such a dangerous guy prisoner would be troublesome in its own way. And so, I don't know if Wagner ordered it, but the remaining Blauer Nebel machines have retreated for the time being. They were probably affected by the destruction of the commander's machine. So, although I don't know how much leeway we have, it looks like we can take a breather for now."

"I see..." I thought to myself, relieved. But then, strangely enough, even at this point, the color suddenly drained from my face and cold sweat broke out all over my body.

"...How horrifying. It's a wonder I wasn't killed." I vividly remembered the muzzle of the large machine gun pointed at me, which could only be described as ominous, and I shuddered.

"Indeed, all data has been completely erased," Hermes groaned, a difficult expression on her face, after checking the computer system in the management facility.

"In the end, this pipeline is ready for immediate use, but there is no proof that it has ever been used before. Moreover, there is no trace of any troops having passed through it, as were the troops that attacked the German army base or the new resource areas in Poland. We can raise suspicions as to why a pipeline that was supposed to have been abandoned was so meticulously maintained and even heavily guarded by elite troops, but that's about it. There is no evidence that would force the German government to say, "Thank you for your hard work," without making excuses."

"So this is merely strengthening the circumstantial evidence," Zead groaned, frowning.

"Now we must make our first choice. Do we take our findings and retreat to HQ for now? Or do we continue our investigation further?"

"If we withdraw, the German government, ZAFTRA, or whoever we're investigating will likely strengthen their defenses as much as possible in the meantime," Bosch said in a thoughtful tone. Currently, Bosch and Latona were on guard outside the control facility aboard a Wanzer, but at Zead's instructions, Hermes had connected the communication line, making it possible for them to participate in the discussions, albeit only by voice.

"Unless we can obtain an official position, there's not much point in withdrawing and then going back and re-investigating, and I think it's almost impossible."

"Yes. That's why I brought all the equipment I could carry. Latona's machine has been repaired, and we can adequately put together a replacement for Elsa's machine with the equipment we have, so there's no need for us to return to HQ," Hermes replied, to which Latona interrupted with a slightly irritated look on her face. "So, if you're going back to headquarters, that means you're wrapping things up, right? To be honest, I wonder what you were trying to do there, but if anything, isn't the issue of whether you can continue your investigation further or not?"

"That's right. Now, let's talk about the prospects if we proceed with the investigation further," said Zead calmly and began to explain.

"For now, Bassau is the only place on the German side that seems to have some kind of clue. Therefore, if we were to continue our investigation, I have determined that there would be no other effective method than infiltrating Zaftra. Of course, infiltrating Zaftra would be even more dangerous. In Germany, unless we make a huge mistake, I think it would be possible to avoid fighting with forces other than Blauer Nebel, but that is not the case in Zaftra. The almost endless Zaftra army will turn against us, no questions asked. If we fight honestly, we won't have enough lives."

"I think everyone already understands the dangers of infiltrating Zaftra," Latona replied in a brusque tone.

"What I want to know is whether there is a way to avoid that danger, obtain the evidence, and return alive. If we have no choice but to charge head-on, I too think it would be best to return to HQ while we're still alive, isn't that the case?"

"That depends on your definition of 'head-on,'" Zead replied in a very serious tone.

"If they are entering Zaftra through illegal means, they have no choice but to break through the border somewhere and charge in. Since we don't have any ships, we have to choose between air, land, or via pipeline."

"If we were to invade Zaftra in a Durandal transport plane, we 'd only be able to skim the border. If we go in even a little deeper, we'll be bombarded with anti-aircraft missiles and air defense fighter jets, and no matter how hard Captain Robert tries, there's no way he'll return alive," Hermes said as if it were a matter of course, and Bosch responded with a sigh.

"In other words, going by air is not much different from going by land. However, even if you go by land, it's an extremely difficult task to evade the border guards of Zaftra and enter the country. Besides, once you enter Zaftra, it doesn't mean you've

achieved your goal."

"Exactly. If we invade by land, the biggest problem is that we have no idea where we should go to find evidence of the pipeline's use. Kursk Station, which had direct flights to Bassau before it was abolished, is the most likely place, but to be honest, I don't think it's possible to invade Kursk, which is far from the border, by land or air. Furthermore, the possibility of obtaining evidence and escaping alive is hopeless no matter how you look at it." Hermes shrugged, and I asked him in a slightly skeptical tone.

"So, does that mean the best way to infiltrate is through a pipeline?"

"By a process of elimination, that's it," Hermes replied simply. But I wasn't convinced and pressed on.

"But this pipeline is completely managed and controlled by Zaftra, isn't it? Won't that mean we'll be heading straight into it under Zaftra's watch?"

"Well, that's not the case. Special vehicles are used to travel within the pipeline, but the vehicles waiting in Bassau have a completely independent control system," Hermes said, grinning.

"It's probably for confidentiality reasons, and in fact, because they use that kind of system, they could do something as reckless as just deleting all the control data. But if we can tamper with the independent system and use it in reverse, we can hide the fact that the vehicle is moving from the ZAFTRA control system, or we can send dummy data to confuse it. If we do it well, we might not even notice that we've entered the pipeline."

"No, you shouldn't be so optimistic," Latona objected in a scolding tone.

"Once we depart, the Blauer Nebel guys will naturally return to the control facility and investigate. Once that happens, it will be obvious that we have entered the pipeline just by counting the number of remaining vehicles. If we are actually moving the vehicles, no matter how well we can fool the computer, it is not something that can be easily concealed."

"Yes, that's certainly true," groaned Hermes, frowning.

"But if we display one more vehicle than the actual number, they might not bother to check... No, that's not it. All the data has been erased, so even if we do something like that, it will just look unnatural and there will be no point. I get it. If we get into the pipeline, we will assume that this fact will be immediately revealed to the Zaftra side."

"That's better. We can't entrust our lives to unfounded optimism," Latona responded immediately, then continued speaking in a stern tone.

"In that case, if it becomes known that we have entered the pipeline, common sense would dictate that Zaftra will strengthen the defenses of the pipeline's exit, Kursk Station. I believe that right next to that station is a Wanzer unit base that is one of the largest in Zaftra. There should be no shortage of defensive forces. If we were to burst in there, no matter how much trickery we try, it would be completely useless. It would be like a moth flying into a flame."

"Well, it's true that when the pipeline was in use the only direct trains to Bassau were from Kursk, but that doesn't mean there weren't physical pipes connecting it to the other stations," Hermes said, as he brought up a complex diagram on his handheld communicator, much like a subway map of a large city.

"I think the image should now appear on the Wanzer's communications monitor. What do you think?"

"Yes, I can see it. Is this a route map for the Zaftra Pipeline?" Bosch asked, and Hermes nodded.

"Exactly. I had anticipated something like this happening, so I got it via a different route. As you can see, the pipeline to Bassau is a straight road with no branches outside of Zaftra. However, before reaching Kursk Station, as soon as we entered Zaftra, it connects to a large branching junction. It should be possible to remove the vehicle from the direct route to Kursk here, and then, at least in theory, we'd be free to go to any station. We'd just have to look for a place where the defenses are thin and get out."

"Well, it's true that even for the Zaftra army, it would take a considerable amount of time to deploy sufficient troops to all of the pipeline stations," Latona groaned, reluctantly acknowledging the situation.

"But can we get evidence by going to a station other than Kursk?"

"I can't say it's absolutely certain, but I think it's probably fine. Wherever the station is that's currently operating, they should be able to access the management data for the entire Zaftra Pipeline, and there should be records of the smuggled resources and raiding forces moving towards Bassau. Unlike the record data at the ends, the management data for the entire pipeline can't be changed or deleted so casually." Everyone else thought quietly for a while after hearing Hermes' passionate speech, as if they had agreed to do so. Then, Latona suddenly glared at him.

"It's pretty much down to luck, and the risks are great, but it doesn't seem so foolish that I'd want to throw my gear on the floor and start screaming about not being able to do it. I'll go for it."

"I see. If you say so, knowing the true state of affairs of the Zaftra Border Guard,

then maybe it's not such a bad idea," Bosch growled, sounding a little unsure of himself.

"I'm really worried. Infiltrating through the pipeline gives you less freedom of movement than if you were to use the air or land routes, and I can't help but feel like I'd quickly become a rat in a cage."

"It's understandable that you would think that, but to be honest, I was taken aback by the fact that it was coming through a pipeline," Latona replied in a serious voice.

"If I was caught off guard, it would be a surprise attack that the majority of the Zaftra military had never imagined, and of course, had not prepared for. In that sense, the chances of success are not as low as you think."

"I see. Since Zaftra has used the pipeline to send in Wanzer units, I expected that the other side would do the same, and I predicted that they would have some sort of countermeasure in place, but is that not the case?" Bosch asked, and this time Latona chuckled softly.

"I know I may say it, but the majority of the Zaftra military personnel don't have that much imagination. That's right, at least when I was in the border patrol, there was no one with enough imagination to worry that the enemy might use a pipeline to cross the border. Of course, I don't know all of what the military leadership was worried about at the time and what measures they had in place, and it's even more so now. But because of that, when the Zaftra military is actually taken by surprise, we don't know how they will react. There's a chance they'll be stunned and unable to react, but there's also a chance they'll lose their minds and resort to some sudden, violent action. It's best to keep that in mind."

"A sudden and violent act? Specifically, what is the possibility of it happening?" I asked hesitantly, sensing some uneasiness in the air. Latona responded simply.

"Yes, maybe the Zaftra army will try to blow up the pipeline, taking all of us inside with them."

"Huh? The Zaftra army?" Hermes exclaimed in a shocked voice.

"Well, I thought that if the German side wanted to hide the fact that the pipeline was in use at all costs, they might blow up the pipeline facilities in Bassau. But that's just a terminal station that isn't supposed to be in use. Destroying the pipeline itself is a completely different story. Also, if the Zaftra army were to destroy the pipeline, they wouldn't be able to do it openly outside the country, so they would have to do it within the country. If they destroyed the pipeline in such a place close to the junction, it would affect other lines, and it would not be easy to restore it. It is no exaggeration to say that Zaftra is maintaining the economic activity of the nation

with its pipeline network, so would they really want to do something like that that would shoot themselves in the foot?"

"That's why I say it's an outrageous act," Latona said, sounding a little annoyed.

"Well, if you think about it rationally, it would be a much more effective countermeasure to patiently track where the intruders are moving and deploy security forces to stations that are at risk of being attacked, rather than forcibly preventing the intrusion by destroying the pipeline. When an unexpected situation occurs, is there a commander in the Zaftra military who can calmly take effective measures like that? At least, I don't think there is anyone like that."

"Of course, if such a calm and capable commander were in charge of the defenses on Zaftra's side, we would immediately find ourselves in a desperate situation," Bosch pointed out, returning to his usual nonchalant tone.

"However, if the commander is not calm and competent, there is a possibility that he will take the reckless step of destroying the pipeline. That would be troublesome in itself."

"Indeed, if the Zaftra army destroys the pipeline, we won't be able to move forward physically, and our investigation will be thwarted for the time being. But at the same time, it will block the Zaftra army's means of sending in special forces to attack key EC locations, even if only temporarily," Zead, who had been silent for a while up to this point, spoke in a calm tone.

"Of course, it would be best if we could obtain solid evidence that would convince the German and Zaftra governments, expose the conspiracy, and reveal the truth. But even if we don't go that far, if we can disable this pipeline, we should be able to hinder the progress of the conspiracy to some extent. It's worth taking the risk and giving it a try."

"I see. If you think about it like that, then there is a point in using a pipeline," Bosch said with a voice of understanding, and Zead looked at me and asked,

"What do you think, Elsa?"

"Well, there's just one thing I want to confirm. Approximately how fast can this pipeline vehicle go?" I asked the question that had been bothering me for a while, and Hermes immediately answered.

"The maximum speed seems to be over 400 kilometers per hour, but it's not possible to maintain that speed from departure to arrival. On average, it's probably around 200 to 300 kilometers per hour. And it's about a thousand kilometers from Bassau to the Zaftra border. I think we can get there in a little over four hours."

"Four hours, huh. The Zaftra side will receive the message, grasp the situation,

discuss how to respond, make a decision, issue an order, and mobilize their forces... It's a delicate time to see if we can outwit them," I told Zead as I heard Latona groan. "If that's the case, I think we should act as quickly as possible. If we give the Zaftra side some leeway and allow them to deal with the situation calmly, our chances of achieving results will only get smaller."

"That's certainly true," I pointed out, and Zead nodded seriously.

"Well then, let's hurry and get ready."

MISSION 8:

Near the Zaftra border

"So far, there are no signs that anyone is attempting any sabotage," Hermes declared, looking at the display screen of the monitor computer that had been brought in from the transport plane and connected to it, in a small room filled with instruments at the very front of the pipeline vehicle that had departed for Zaftra. "Maybe there's no way to set a trap until the vehicle enters Zaftra. Of course, we can't just assume that and let our guard down."

"Yes. I'm sure Zaftra isn't as desperate as Germany to keep the EC countries from knowing that a pipeline that was supposed to have been abandoned was still in operation, but I'm sure it's the same for them. They probably can't do anything flashy within Austria and the Czech Republic, which are members of the EC. But they might launch an attack if they enter Ukraine, a vassal state..." Latona reacted to Zead's dazzling gaze.

"Ukraine may be seen as a vassal state of Zaftra from the perspective of other countries, but the reality is quite complicated. In particular, if Zaftra troops enter Ukrainian territory without prior permission, the Ukrainian government and military will strongly oppose them, regardless of the circumstances. Even just from my knowledge, there have been several cases where Zaftra border guards who entered Ukrainian territory in pursuit of armed smugglers encountered Ukrainian troops and came close to fighting. The Zaftra side assumed that the Ukrainians were in cahoots with the smugglers, but from the Ukrainian side's perspective, the Zaftra military is a much shadier villain than the smugglers."

"I see. They don't like each other and don't trust each other at all, but they can't completely cut ties with each other, so they just stay together like neighbors," Latona nodded with a wry smile at Bosch's assessment.

"Well, that's how it is. Of course, there are many in Zaftra who do not understand the anti-Zaftra sentiment on the Ukrainian side and insensitively treat them as a vassal state, which is also the source of trouble. However, if you ask me whether the Zaftra army would go to the trouble of going to Ukrainian territory in this critical situation and cause trouble, I can confidently answer that they would not."

"I see. So if anything were to happen, it would have to happen after we entered Zaftra," Zead grunted, and this time Hermes responded.

"I have plans in place for the case that the pipeline is destroyed between the Zaftra border and the junction, and for the case that we manage to get all the way to the junction. If the pipeline is destroyed before the junction, I don't know how far we'll be able to move after that, but we'll retreat as much as we can and escape from a

position closer to the border than the destruction point. We'll probably have to abandon most of our supplies. But I think we can take the bare minimum of spare parts and ammunition in small self-propelled containers. Then, as soon as we get above ground, we'll switch to hover legs."

"Oh, that's right. If we use a self-propelled container, the container's legs have to be hover-mounted as well. There's no point if the container can't go where the Wanzer can," Latona pointed out, and Hermes nodded with a frown.

"Oh, I see. I hadn't thought about that. Well, I have a spare hovercraft, so I think I'll make it just in time. I thought I'd brought it with plenty of time to spare."

"Unforeseen circumstances always occur," Latona replied, with a serious expression.

"So, what do you do if you get into the junction?"

"In that case, we'll stay inside the pipeline for as long as possible. Inside the junction, the pipelines are intricately connected. Even if one or two are destroyed, we can go around and use another route, and even the Zaftra army wouldn't be able to destroy so many pipelines that are currently sending supplies. So, if we get inside the junction, we'll probably achieve our objective of collecting data from operating stations. Of course, I'm not saying that escaping afterwards will be easy, but I think it's harder to be captured if we travel by pipeline as close to the border as possible than going above ground and escaping in a Wanzer," Latona groaned as she explained.

"That seems like a pretty optimistic prediction. Unlike the EC and USN militaries, the ZAFTRA military doesn't give much thought to the impact that its operations will have on the lives of its citizens and its economy. In the first place, the ZAFTRA military's upper echelons have a strong tendency to push through operations even if they know it will cause losses to their own forces, in order to crush the enemy. Moreover, their basic stance towards ordinary citizens is to cooperate with the military in silence, without making selfish demands. You should be prepared for the possibility of pipeline destruction even inside the junction."

"I see. In that case, where and under what circumstances will it come out of the pipeline? The timing becomes an issue," Zead said in a firm tone to a groaning Hermes.

"We have no choice but to respond flexibly to such situations. If you can just show us the plan, it is my role to decide when, where, and how to execute it. So, once we enter Zaftra, we will likely be in a constant state of non-stop activity, so I would like you all to get some rest while you can. I will also be resting. However, we cannot all fall asleep, so we will have two people stand guard at a time. I will leave it to you,

Latona and Elsa, to keep watch at first. When the time is up, Bosch and I will take over. Hermes, you can rest at your own discretion. You said that there was still work that needed to be done."

" Yes, first I need to adjust a pair of spare hover legs so that they can be attached to the self-propelled container. There are a few other adjustments left to make, but once that's done I'll take a proper rest," Hermes said, and quickly headed to the rear of the vehicle.

"If anything unusual happens, call me right away," they said as Zead and Bosch left. Latona and I were left behind.

"Whew. I never dreamed I'd end up returning to my homeland in this way," Latona said, half talking to herself, as she looked at me and asked.

"Elsa's home country is France, right? Does she have any relatives back home?"

"Yes, my parents, grandparents, and older brothers are all still alive. But there are a lot of military people in my family, so not everyone is back home," I replied, and Latona nodded with a small smile.

"It's sad. I have almost no relatives. Although, it's also true that that's why I was able to do something as reckless as leaving the Zaftra military and staying with EC," Latona said, speaking without any response.

"My father passed away when I was twelve years old. It was right before I entered military school. My father had been quite reckless in his younger days, but he fell ill just before he married my mother. I remember him as a sickly man who was always coughing and would fall ill as soon as it got a little cold. So when he passed away, I had a strong feeling that it was something that was bound to happen. To be honest, every time my father fell ill, my mother would overexert herself by taking care of him, even if it meant going out of her way, so I was more worried about her. When my father finally passed away, I was certainly very sad, but it's also true that I was relieved that this would reduce my mother's burden. In fact, my mother was my whole world to me as a child. My mother was a soldier in the Zaftra army, and she was a hero who had been awarded many medals for her military achievements in suppressing the civil war and border conflicts as an excellent tank unit commander. When the Zaftra army started to fully introduce the Wanzers, she was involved in the military and apparently even worked as a test pilot. She married my father late, so by the time I was old enough to understand, she was practically retired, but she was still called into the military as an advisor and was treated as a celebrity in the area, so she was quite busy with all sorts of things. I think she had the rank of honorary colonel. As the only daughter of such a mother, I joined the military and set

out on the path to becoming a Wanzer pilot without any questions. I suppose being the daughter of a hero made me stand out, for better or worse, but my mother was a person who valued honor, fairness, and practicality, and she never did anything unfairly convenient for her daughter. After all, she told me, a young person who had graduated from military academy, that if you acted like an elite in a department with few hardships, you would soon become dull and useless. I told her to go and serve in the border patrol and get my hands dirty."

"...She was a wonderful mother," I added silently, although I felt that such a declaration was something a father would normally say to his son. Latona then continued speaking calmly.

"After my time with the Border Guard, I was sent to the EC by military order to exchange Wanzer techniques and tactics. According to my mother, who was a combat veteran, this was a mission in which she could appear elite in a department with few hardships, but perhaps she had already put in enough hardships in her time with the Border Guard, so she didn't object. Or rather, I heard later that my mother had asked a general she was close to be added to the EC dispatch team. Given my mother's beliefs, which I knew, this was an almost unthinkable act, but perhaps she had a premonition. Then, within six months of me being sent to the EC, my mother suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, collapsed, and passed away. My superior officer recommended that I take special leave to return to my hometown, but to my surprise, my mother had left a will in which she made it clear that, even if she died, she did not want her daughter's mission to be interrupted and her return home."

"What does that mean...?" I blurted out in a confused voice, not wanting to come back for the funeral, or cutting off all ties with her. Latona responded with a slightly complicated expression, somewhere between a smile and a wry smile.

"I was surprised and hesitant, but in the end I decided to follow my mother's will and continue my mission without returning home. My superiors and those around me interpreted this as me being considerate, as even the death of a parent was a personal matter and I should not allow it to interfere with my military duties, which were my official duty, and praised them for being so different from those who are called heroes, but I didn't think so. A long time ago, when my father became ill and was bedridden, my mother always took care of him herself, even if it interfered with her military duties. What on earth was my mother thinking when she left such a will? After thinking about it, I began to think that perhaps she felt that the changes in the constitution of the Zafra army were dangerous. It's true that around the time I was

with the Border Guard, the idea of surprise attacks by a small number of elite units with special abilities began to emerge strongly in the Zaftra army, where group tactics centered on long-distance attack units had been the norm up until then. I think that special operations units that would rather commit suicide than be captured probably existed before then, but they were more of a behind-the-scenes dirty work unit, and for the average Zaftra soldier, being assigned to such a unit was more of a punishment than anything else. Regardless of whether that feeling was appropriate or not, the change in policy by the Zaftra military's upper echelons to position the special operations units as elites and select and appoint outstanding soldiers to the position must have seemed horrifying to my mother, who was an old-fashioned soldier. And the Sakata Industries incident came to light, as if to back up that speculation. The idea of using the brains of outstanding soldiers to directly control the Wanzers is exactly what the current Zaftra military dreams of, the self-sacrificing super soldiers specialized in combat. Whether or not that can be called an elite is aside."

"So, if you had stayed in the Zaftra military, there's a chance you might have been caught up in something like Sakata Industries' experiments?" I asked breathlessly, and Latona tilted her head slightly.

"Well, I wonder. It may or may not have happened. At least officially, Sakata Industries went bankrupt and the research on super soldiers was sealed away. However, I wouldn't be too surprised if the Zaftra military had continued the research in secret. Well, I think it was more likely that he would be scouted by a special operations unit and kill himself, rather than having his brain removed and becoming a super soldier integrated with a Wanzer. Either way, I thought Shinpei would be spared. And in the aftermath of the Sakata Industries incident, the exchange of Wanzer technology and tactics between Zaftra and EC was canceled, and I was naturally ordered to return to my home country... but I refused the order." I looked silently at Latona's stern, toned profile. She had lived her life since she was a child, intending to devote herself to her country and the military, so what feelings must have made her decide to leave both? Those who are not soldiers probably can't imagine or understand. And Latona continued speaking calmly.

"My superior officer scolded me to my face, asking if I had gone mad. He also slammed me for selling out my country and tarnishing my mother's heroic name. But my mother had written in her will that the country was not worth returning to. My resolve was unwavering. Looking back now, I realize that I was doing something reckless. I should have kept my true feelings hidden until the last minute, and then

been smart enough to suddenly defect. But I guess I was a lot naiver then than I am now. In the end, I was taken in by the British military intelligence department where I was deployed, but I was seriously nearly killed at least three times before that. Well, in the end, I'm still alive, so it's all good. If I had been ordered to be assigned to a special operations unit in Zaftra and openly refused orders, I probably would have lost my life. I now believe that's exactly what my mother meant when she told me not to return to my homeland and to stay abroad," she said, sighing deeply.

"It may be a little late now, but it's not that I've come to hate my homeland. It's true that there are many unreasonable aspects to the country of Zaftra, but that's more or less the case in every country around the world. However, I had an intuition that if I stayed in the Zaftra army, I would soon die an undesirable death, so I ran away without any reason or fault. In that sense, Durandal is, to me, a temporary refuge, although that may be a bad way to put it."

"Yes, I understand what you're saying," I nodded slowly, looking over at Latona.

"And I understand how much you value Durandal, a place that has allowed you to find refuge, even if only temporarily."

"Thank you. If you can understand that much, then I have nothing more to say," Latona said with a wry smile, but continued speaking.

"I don't know whether we'll continue to stay in the evacuation shelter, or go somewhere else eventually. I don't have any special skills other than fighting in a Wanzer. But once I'm no longer in danger, I would like to return to my homeland," she said, and then suddenly looked at her face.

"But this time, I ended up returning to my homeland in a way I never expected. And what's more, I'm returning to a place that's even more dangerous than when I left."

"That's right. First of all, we need to survive safely, otherwise there's nothing we can do." It's not really a laughing matter, but I agreed, thinking that it was somehow a funny situation.

"From now on, I will rely on your information, experience, and skills more than ever before. If there's anything I can do for you, I'll do it, so please don't hesitate to let me know."

"Yeah, what may be common sense to the Zaftran people may be pretty harsh to the weaklings who were raised in the EC or USN, so prepare yourself," Latona retorted with a grin. But she quickly returned to a straight face and continued.

"To be honest, I want to emphasize this to Hermes more than to you. But she can be a bit of a nuisance, and she gets upset easily."

"That's true, but, well, I guess we'll have to leave the reins of Hermes to Zead," I

answered, intentionally speaking in a rather light-hearted tone.

"In this situation, there's no point in sticking to such pretense, but he is essentially a management member. I think he would be psychologically resistant to being told what to do."

"Ah, now that you mention it, that might be true," Latona nodded, as if she had only just realised the truth. If you think about it, she was an elite who graduated from a military academy, and was used to being the one giving orders. Even after joining Durandal, she was paired with Betsuk, a civilian, so although they were both execution members, she maintained a higher position. So, even though she was a management member, it would be hard for her to really understand that Hermes, a civilian, was in a position to give orders to her.

"...Perhaps my sensibilities, as a former NCO and used to being ordered around, are rare or valuable in Durandal?" Well, Hermes aside, Latona, Zead and Bosch are not the type of officers who just give orders and leave it at that; they take the initiative and act on their own, so it's fine, she said, dazzled by his words. Still, if each of them was intent on giving orders to the other, it would be inconvenient no matter how you look at it. Zead, the undisputed leader, and the easygoing Bosch would likely be able to mediate things well, but Latona and Hermes' relationship was something to be careful of. I thought it would be best to talk to Zead about it later when I had the chance.

"We'll be approaching the Zaftra border soon. Everyone, assemble at the front of the vehicle immediately," Zead's voice came from the car's loudspeaker, waking me up from my nap. It wasn't a very long nap after a change of guards, but thankfully I didn't have a nightmare like the other day and woke up refreshed. I immediately jumped out and headed to the front of the vehicle with Latona. When we got there, Zead and Bosch had been keeping watch, so it was only natural, but somewhat surprisingly, Hermes, who is often late in these types of meetings, had arrived earlier than us. Zead then immediately began his explanation.

"Currently, this vehicle is traveling at a slight deceleration. The blue dot on the display panel is its actual current location. Meanwhile, we are having Hermes send dummy data traveling at top speed. The red dot in front of it is the location of the dummy data. If the Zaftra army is determined to destroy the pipeline, the dummy data will probably launch an attack before it enters the junction. If that happens, at worst we will avoid a direct hit."

"I see. So if we take precautions like this, we can reduce, at least to some extent, the risk of the pipeline being suddenly destroyed along with it," Latona nodded with

an understanding look on her face.

"And there seem to be some yellow and green bright spots as well. What are they?"

"This is also dummy data. If the pipeline is destroyed, even if we don't get a direct hit, it will be a clear disadvantage if they find out where the warehouse is," Hermes replied while busily operating the computer. It seemed he had been called to the front of the vehicle much earlier than the rest of us, where he was conducting electronic intelligence operations.

"When disguising information on a computer, it's extremely difficult to completely hide something that actually exists and make it look like nothing exists, but it's not that difficult to make something that doesn't actually exist look like it does. So if you want to disappear quickly, it's more effective to create a lot of dummy information and scatter it around than to struggle to erase your tracks."

"Hmm, is that so?" Latona exclaimed in admiration, but suddenly a different possibility occurred to me.

"But isn't this a considerable threat from Zaftra's point of view?"

"Huh? A threat?" I quickly explain to Hermes, who looks puzzled.

"If we look at this data honestly, it seems like a bunch of vehicles are coming from Bassau in a swarm, right? I don't know if the Zaftra side would even consider the possibility that this is dummy data, but if they interpret it as a large army attacking, won't they panic and decide to blow up the pipeline?"

"I see. I hadn't considered that possibility," Hermes groaned, looking like someone who'd mistook vinegar for a soft drink.

"But even so, I can't just delete the dummy data now... what should I do?"

"Hmm. Well, whatever we do, we'll have to wait for a response from Zaftra," Zead replied, also with a complicated expression. At that moment, the interior lights suddenly switched to a bright red warning light that flashed violently, and a loud announcement in what sounded like Zaftra's language rang out.

"Wh-what?"

"There's been an accident! We're going to make an emergency stop, so sit in your seat and fasten your seat belt!" I yelled as Latona pushed me into the nearest seat, sat down and fastened the attached seat belt. Then, as soon as I had hastily fastened my seat belt, the pipeline vehicle made a noise that could only be described as a tremendous braking noise, and applied an extremely violent sudden brake. If I hadn't been in my seat and fastened my seat belt, I would have been blown away and slammed into the wall without a second thought, and would have died instantly from bruises all over my body.

"So, this must have been a pipeline explosion..."

"Don't talk! I'll bite your tongue!" I started to blurt out unconsciously, but Latona quickly stopped me. The next moment I hastily shut my mouth, the sudden braking must have caused some part of the vehicle to shift, as the vehicle suddenly began to shake up and down and side to side with incredible force. We managed to avoid flipping upside down, but we were tossed around in every other direction more than we could handle.

"Ahhhh..." Unable to do anything, I just stood there in a daze, enduring the storm-like situation. I easily passed the stage of feeling dizzy, and just as I was about to lose consciousness, the train finally came to a final halt with a big thud.

"I... I didn't think an emergency stop on a pipeline vehicle would be this crazy..."

Hermes, slumped in the seat, groaned in an inaudible voice. Then, Zead, probably choking out on purpose, spoke in a powerful voice in contrast.

"It certainly took a toll, but this is no time to rest and recover. If we don't withdraw immediately, the Zaftra army will be swarming in no time!"

"Yeah, I know...but it looks like there's no way we can restart the vehicle and reverse the pipeline. We'll have to abandon the vehicle and escape in a Wanzer," Hermes groaned, undoing her safety belt and staggering out of her seat.

"Damn, I thought I was training my body as best I could, but it's still so hard..."

"Are you okay? Stay strong!" I ran over to Hermes and supported her wobbly body.

To be honest, I was feeling dizzy and unsteady on my feet, so it would be a lie to say it wasn't hard, but for now, supporting the weak civilians had to take priority. Then Zead raised his voice and gave her a pep talk.

"Hurry! No matter how difficult it is, you must get in the Wanzer! Otherwise, the story won't move forward!"

"I guess I've somehow managed to escape this far." I shook my head as I slid over the marshland, which was neither mud nor a swamp, using my hover legs.

Immediately after putting on the hover legs, it felt a little different and I couldn't go very fast, but I finally felt like I was getting used to it. After making an emergency stop and abandoning the stalled pipeline vehicle, we each got into our Wanzers and forced our way out of the maintenance shaft onto the ground. Then, at Latona's suggestion, we quickly attached the hover legs to everyone's Wanzers and the self-propelled containers carrying replacement parts and supplies. We quickly left the well-maintained roads and headed for the border between Zaftra and Ukraine off-road. Someone suggested that it would be faster to use the road with the normal legs until we reached the checkpoint, but Latona immediately rejected this idea.

"For now, the main forces of the Zaftra army seem to be stationed near the blast site of the pipeline, but we can't rely on their mobility. They'll probably use aircraft to search from the air, and once they know the target's location, they'll send in a large number of Wanzers using high-speed trailers and, in some cases, even airborne transports, to quickly encircle them. Once that happens, there's no way they'll escape, no matter how hard they try. Of course, in that situation, there's no way they'll have the time to switch to hover legs."

"Indeed, the Zaftra army's specialty is quickly deploying large numbers of troops. Sometimes it takes a while for them to decide to deploy to an area, but once they do, they are incredibly efficient. If we want to escape, our only option is to disappear before they are deployed," growled Bosch, who had experience operating alongside the Zaftra army on Huffman Island, while Latona continued in a forceful tone.

"Exactly. So, if they can predict our destination and narrow the search area, I believe we will have almost no chance of winning. They will probably not expect that we have a Hoverforce prepared, so the sooner we can get off the road, the greater our chances will be. Also, considering the risk of them predicting our destination, it would be best to avoid heading west to the border by the shortest route. It would be a longer distance to the border, but heading south would be more likely to surprise them, and there would also be more terrain that would be favorable for evading aerial searches."

"Okay. I'll leave it to Latona to decide on the escape route. But before that, let's hurry up and get the landing gear replaced," Zead decided, and we all worked together to replace the landing gear. Normally, this kind of work would be Hermes's domain, but he still had a lot of damage from the pipeline vehicle's emergency stop, and he was busy working on his own vehicle. As a result, the final adjustments to the newly installed hover legs had to be left to each pilot, and although I managed to get my vehicle to function, I couldn't hope for the same stability as when Hermes had made it. However, according to Latona, the hover legs are entirely focused on lifting the heavy Wanzer vehicle off the ground and running, so there is little room for fine adjustment. Even if Hermes had made careful adjustments, there wouldn't be much difference between them and the adjustments in the manual.

"Anyway, it's great if it can move. You'll only get used to using it more than that by actually using it," he said, in a rather rough manner that should be called out, and as if no further questions were needed, Latona fired up the newly installed hovercraft and set off, leading the group. Since we were linked together, there was no way I could be separated from Latona's machine, so I ran desperately in second place.

Then, next to Hermes, the self-propelled container, and Zead, Bosch took the rear position. It was almost dawn when we set off like this. It was now almost dusk, but fortunately we had not come across any aircraft or vehicles of the Zaftra military, or any Wanzers; in fact, despite driving from morning until dusk, there was not even a trace of a civilian vehicle or house in sight.

"It looks like we've somehow managed to avoid the worst-case scenario of our escape route being read and us being surrounded and annihilated," Latona's bright voice came through the headset, half talking to herself.

"The movements of the Zaftra army are much slower than I expected. Perhaps they took the dummy data at face value and assumed that a large army was coming down the pipeline, making them more cautious than necessary. If that's the case, this is a blessing for us."

"However, I think that information that we were a very small minority was leaked to the Zaftra side by Blauer Nebel, who we fought at Bassau. Even so, would you have such a misunderstanding?" Latona answered Bosch's question simply.

"Well, I don't know. But I wonder how seriously Zaftra will take the information from Blauer Nebel. Did Blauer Nebel collude with the German Chancellor and then end up teaming up with Zaftra by chance? Or did they have a relationship with Zaftra from the beginning? That would make a big difference in the story."

"Yes, that's certainly true," Bosch replied in a rather subdued voice.

"To be honest, I still can't believe it. Both Commander Glaser and Commander Wagner in Blauer Nebel are German military supremacists. If they were worried about the future of the country and decided to launch a coup, I wouldn't agree with it, but I could understand it. However, even if it was a plot in collusion with the Prime Minister, inviting the Zaftra army to destroy their own country's base is completely incompatible with their ideology. That said, they are not the type to compromise with reality and abandon their ideology. On the contrary, I think they are the type to try to forcefully change reality to fit their ideology."

"I don't have any connection with Wagner or Glaser, so I can't really say anything about that. But with this incident, it seems to me that Zaftra's German-Polish invasion force is acting with complete confidence that Blauer Nebel will provide them with proper support," Bosch responded suspiciously to Latona's words.

"What does that mean?"

"I know I should say it, but Zaftrans are generally very suspicious of outsiders. They don't really trust people who are on their side solely because of a temporary mutual interest or circumstances," Latona explained in a matter-of-fact tone.

"To avoid being betrayed at any time, we do not give important information to such people and never entrust them with jobs that involve life and death. You have conducted joint operations with the Zaftra army before, so I think you probably have some experience with this."

"Yes, certainly," Bosch said, and after a moment he groaned.

"And this time, the Zaftra army is not treating Blauer Nebel like an outsider, but trusting her and entrusting her with their support. In other words, there must be some reason why the Zaftra army considers Blauer Nebel to be family."

"That's right. Frederick Lancaster said that Wagner, Glaser, and even the German Chancellor might be spies for Zaftra. Even if we go that far, it's entirely possible that Wagner, the field commander, was actually on Zaftra's side," Latona said, before Zead's voice interrupted.

"Indeed, after Poland was attacked, Glaser was stationed in Berlin, but Wagner came to the old castle base near the site and closely supported the escape of the assault force. I think that's possible. However, if Wagner is a spy for Zaftra, the information he sends from Bassau should be trusted by the Zaftra side, so the scale of our forces would be accurately understood."

"They'll probably find out eventually. But the information sent by a spy doesn't reach the troops on the ground directly. The more important the spy is, the more it has to go through the leadership before it gets through. The routes the information is sent also often take time and effort to maintain secrecy, so it probably won't be in time," Latona stated clearly. But who was it that said he had no special skills other than fighting in a Wanzer, I wondered in my mind, astonished. If that was the case, surely he could be an intelligence analysis officer or a senior staff officer right away.

"This is what it means to be an elite who has no self-awareness..." Well, if fighting was really the only skill he had, there's no way he could graduate from the military academy, I thought to myself with a small sigh. Then, whether she knew that I had such an impression or not, or rather, there was no way she could know, Latona continued speaking crisply.

"For that reason, I won't say that there is absolutely no possibility that the main Zaftra forces, having received word from Bassau, will suddenly become active behind our lines, but it's not that likely. Rather, the problem is the border patrols that are on regular patrols."

"That's the department you were assigned to before," Zead replied in a rather serious tone.

"That alone is enough to make them a formidable opponent. Is it possible that any

of your former colleagues or subordinates are stationed in this area?"

"No, the border patrol frequently changes personnel to prevent collusion with smugglers. All of the people who were there when I was assigned there should have been transferred long ago. Although the person in charge has changed, the content of their work probably won't change much. Small units equipped with Hover legs patrol the border areas, cracking down on smugglers and people illegally entering and leaving the country, but in reality it's not much different from anti-guerrilla warfare using Wanzers. Anyone who would dare to cross the Zaftra border using illegal means would surely have one or two armed Wanzers."

"So, the Zaftra Border Guard are experts at hunting guerrillas?" Hermes, who had recovered some of the damage from being aboard the Wanzer, joined the conversation. Then Latona answered simply.

"That's right. They don't have particularly powerful weapons, but in a melee between a small number of Wanzers equipped with Hover legs, they're probably more formidable than Blauer Nebels. They are also equipped with high-performance sensors, making them good at disruption and pursuit battles. Their patrols change time and area almost every day, so unless you're an insider, it's impossible to avoid them in advance. Of course, they patrol a fairly wide area, so if you're lucky you can avoid encountering them, but it's really all down to luck. Incidentally, when I was in office, the patrol route was calculated so that if you tried to break through the border straight at the normal cruising speed of a hover leg, no matter how you entered, you would always end up in the detection range of a patrol at least once, and set it accordingly. This was my original idea, so I don't know if they still do it the same way, but it's possible that it's been passed down."

"...You really are someone we don't want to make into an enemy, not just as a pilot, but as a commander as well," Bosch growled with realization, but before Latona could respond, Zead spoke up.

"In the end, it seems we should prepare ourselves for an encounter with the border patrol and a fight. In any case, information about our intrusion will likely have reached the border patrol, so it's highly likely that the border area will be under a stricter security regime than usual."

"That's certainly true. If they mobilize all the troops that are usually on standby to be on alert, we won't be able to break through the border unless we engage in at least one battle," Latona continued in a practical tone.

"The thing you need to be most careful about when fighting with hover legs is that it's nearly impossible to dodge just before the enemy fires. Due to the structure of

the hover legs, you can't expect such quick reactions, but the more skilled a pilot is at evasive maneuvers with normal Wanzers, the more likely they are to fall into this trap. To be honest, I fell into it at first, too. Bosch and Elsa, please be especially careful."

"Okay, I'll be careful," Bosch replied calmly, before adding something that had been bothering me too.

"But if I can't dodge in an instant, does that mean my only option is to dodge enemy attacks using speed?"

"That's right. Rather than dodging, you'll hope that the enemy will miss their shot, but the key is to always move around and make it difficult for them to aim," Latona replied, and suddenly Hermes growled in a grumbling tone.

"Oh, I see. If the Hover Legs are equipped and evasion becomes impossible, the Tatou will simply become a Wanzer with thin armor. Instead of just replacing the legs, I should have equipped everyone with thickly armored Wanzers like the Cicada N with Hover Legs. It's too late now, though."

"Yes, I completely agree that it's too late," Latona said rather harshly, making me feel cold for a moment, but then Zead interrupted me in a stern tone.

"In any case, this is enemy territory. If a battle were to break out and we were able to defeat the enemy at hand, we would have no hope of winning if reinforcements arrived while we were struggling. Our absolute priority is to cross the border as quickly and with as little damage as possible, rather than defeating the enemy."

"Cross the border quickly and with as little damage as possible. It'll be difficult, but we have no choice," Latona replied firmly.

"If I were to die or be captured here, people would think that I had come back to my homeland to risk my life. I absolutely do not want that to happen."

"I understand how you feel," I said without saying a word. And the day after that conversation, we actually encountered the border guards of the Zaftra Army.

"Sensor response! There's a Zaftra army Wanzer on the right ahead! It's coming straight towards us! Six confirmed!" Hermes, who was equipped with a high-performance sensor backpack on her Wanzer, shouted, and Latona responded.

"If we run away, we'll be pursued and attacked while calling for reinforcements. It's better to engage and strike them down. Elsa, let's go!"

"When?" I tried my best to follow the Latona machine as it charged ahead, using its hover propulsion. It seemed that the Zead machine had fired a missile from behind, but I didn't have time to pay attention to it. The Zaftra army's Wanzers were, naturally, equipped with hover-legs, and they closed the distance without hesitation

straight for the pile bunker. At the front were two machines equipped with melee weapons and shields. Behind them were two machines equipped with machine guns and shields. There seemed to be another machine further back, but perhaps it was equipped with long-range weapons such as armor-piercing cannons or explosive cannons. For the time being, it didn't seem to be firing. Just as I was thinking this, a grenade exploded in the sky, causing a fierce rain of flames to fall. To make matters worse, at least one of the two machines at the very back seemed to be equipped with a grenade.

"I'll crush you from behind!" I declared in a roaring voice, and Latona made a sharp turn to dodge the melee weapon-equipped unit that was approaching in front of me, and tried to go around to the rear of the enemy line. The machine gun-equipped unit then started firing furiously, but since they were both moving at high speed, the accuracy wasn't very good. Latona's unit continued to charge forward, using its shield to defend itself. I could only do my best to keep up. Then, the two units at the very back of the line, which had been running in a line with the others, suddenly changed direction and made what at first glance appeared to be a flight. I hesitated for a moment about whether I should pursue them, but Latona didn't hesitate at all, and ferociously pursued the fleeing unit. At that moment, a grenade was fired, probably with a purpose, and an unavoidable fire rained down on our unit.

"Dammit!" I spat out in annoyance, but Latona continued charging forward. The grenade-equipped unit tried to back away and put some distance between us, but Latona's unit was faster in approach. Normally, there shouldn't be much difference in running speed between hover legs, so this was probably down to a difference in skill. And after what seemed more like a car chase than a Wanzer battle, Latona cornered the grenade-equipped unit. It was no longer close enough to fire a grenade, and the enemy unit swung its melee weapon at us, but this was a futile resistance against Latona. At the same time as the pile bunker hit, my unit, which had somehow managed to keep up, fired a shotgun in a linked attack, silencing the grenade-equipped unit with a single hit and ejecting the pilot.

"Yes..." I breathed a sigh of relief, but without a moment's hesitation, Latona attacked the aircraft accompanying the grenade-equipped aircraft. It seemed to be escorting the grenade-equipped aircraft, and was equipped with a machine gun and a shield, but its movements were strangely sluggish, and its attacks were fired in the wrong direction. I had heard that the border patrol was made up of elite personnel, but I thought that some of them might have just been recruits. However, Latona attacked without mercy, and although I was a little confused, since we were linked, I



automatically provided support with a shotgun. The enemy aircraft was instantly disabled, and the pilot was ejected along with the cockpit, but Latona pointed a pile bunker at the ejected cockpit and used an external loudspeaker to make a ferocious threat in the Zaftra language.

"...Wh-what is this?" While I was confused, the pilot hastily escaped from the cockpit, and in the next moment, the pile bunkers of the Latona's plane literally crushed the vacant cockpit. Then the Latona immediately turned the plane around and took off. I hesitated for a moment, but then I quickly ran after the Latona and asked.

"Did something happen in the cockpit of that plane?"

"Didn't you notice? That is a machine equipped with advanced sensors. Even just the ejected cockpit can activate its sensors over a considerable distance. It's a troublesome opponent," Latona explained to me, and I shivered at my own carelessness. She had been trying to destroy the machine equipped with advanced sensors quickly, rather than the machine equipped with grenades. Moreover, while we were attacking the enemy's rear, a terrible situation was occurring at our rear as well. Just when we thought that no pile bunker or machine gun would get in the way, the enemy's machine equipped with melee weapons and machine guns, a total of four machines, had joined forces and started to destroy our machine equipped with advanced sensors and long-range attack machines. The machine equipped with grenades Although we had destroyed it, it was no time to take a sigh of relief. And when we rushed back, the situation had been reversed from what it had been a moment ago. The Zead's unit, which had been pushed so far that it could no longer use its missiles, fought back with its melee weapons, and the Hermes unit was also firing frantically, but there was no sign of it hitting the enemy unit, which was moving at high speed, let alone hitting it. As for the Bosch unit, both of its arms had been destroyed by pile bunkers, and it was already out of action, and was only firing its pile bunker machine gun. The enemy unit had probably been hit by the missiles as well. One by one, the units equipped with melee weapons and machine guns had been brought down, reducing their fighting strength by half, but even so, it was a dangerous situation.

"I won't let you do that!" Latona's unit furiously attacked the melee weapon-equipped unit that was engaged with Zead's unit. The enemy's skill seemed to be quite high, as the pile bunker it slammed into the enemy was deflected by its shield, but at the same time, my unit fired a shotgun in a linked attack. Seizing the moment, Zead's unit quickly retreated and fired a missile at the machine gun unit. The

machine gun unit seemed to have already sustained considerable damage, as it was hit directly by the missile and halted, with its pilot being ejected. At this point, no matter how skilled the Border Patrol's melee weapon-equipped unit was, they were already outnumbered. Moreover, we had to make a getaway before reinforcements arrived, so there was no hesitation or bowing. As I was blocking Latona's pile bunker attack, I fired my shotgun and machine gun at the same time, and Zead's unit finished it off by firing a missile.

"Let's get going! Is there anyone who is having trouble moving?" Latona called out, not even looking at the cockpit that had been ejected. Then Hermes answered, panting heavily.

"The Wanzers can somehow move, but the self-propelled containers have been destroyed. The hover legs won't function."

"We have no choice but to throw it away," Latona said simply.

"I'm just glad I didn't have to throw away my Wanzer. Let's go!"

"Okay, hurry up!" Zead responded, and we left the self-propelled container behind and began to make a run for it at full speed.

MISSION 9:

Nikolaev Port

"Well, even if we don't have to fight, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to cross Ukraine without being thwarted in this condition," Hermes groaned, looking troubled as he inspected the damage to the Wanzer. We were lucky to have only engaged in combat with six Border Patrol Wanzers once, destroying them, and were able to cross the Zaftra border and enter the Ukrainian side without encountering any more enemies. Latona's judgment was that the other units had received a distress signal from the destroyed patrol, and had tried to rush to their aid, causing them to disorganize their formation, which resulted in them being caught off guard. However, just because we entered Ukraine doesn't mean we're in a safe zone at all.

Compared to Zaftra itself, the search and pursuit may be a little less rigorous, but if someone discovers us, we'll be reported as a suspicious armed Wanzer, and if we encounter the Ukrainian military, they may ask us to surrender first, but if we don't surrender, we'll definitely be in a fight. Moreover, our Wanzers were badly damaged in the battle with the Zaftra border guards. The most serious damage was done to Bosch's unit, with both arms destroyed, but Zead's and Hermes' units were also deeply damaged in various places, although they were not rendered inoperable. My unit and Latona's units were relatively lightly injured, but they were hit by flames from a grenade, causing significant damage to the sensors in their heads and shoulder joints. And most seriously, because we had abandoned the self-propelled container, we were unable to replace the broken parts and were unable to carry out any repairs beyond temporary measures.

"Even if it was in perfect condition, traveling long distances without replacement parts means you never know what kind of unexpected accidents might happen. After all the damage it's suffered in battle, there's no way it could be properly repaired, so it's not surprising it would break down the moment you try to move it."

"I already know that much, without you having to tell me," Latona replied in a clearly displeased tone, as Hermes shrugged and shook her head somewhat exaggeratedly.

"The problem is what to do about the current situation. If you say you absolutely need the parts, then we have no choice but to come up with ways to get them," Latona said audaciously, glaring at Hermes.

"In the worst case scenario, we could even attack the Ukrainian military base where the Wanzers are stationed and take them over. What I want to ask you is whether it's really worth taking that much risk to get repair parts. What do you think?"

"Well, even if you ask me what's going on, there's no way I can make a quick judgment without any evidence or anything," Hermes retorted mutely, and Latona

snorted.

"If you can't make a decision, just keep quiet. I'm not in a position to listen to endless complaints from someone who can't offer a well-judged, constructive opinion."

"So, Latona, do you have a well-thought-out, constructive solution?" Bosch asked in a nonchalant tone, a question that could be quite harsh depending on how it was heard.

"Even though you came from Zaftra, you are the one who knows the land around here the best. First, can you please tell us your solution?"

"I understand. To be frank, I don't think there is any realistic solution at this point other than relying on illegal Ukrainian organizations," Latona said, and Zead frowned and asked,

"An illegal organization? Anti-government guerrillas or something?"

"No, that's not it. They're armed smugglers, self-proclaimed vigilantes who are practically bandits, gangsters who call themselves the bosses of the city, things like that. They're not anti-government, but rather a criminal organization that is in collusion with the Ukrainian government," Latona explained in a matter-of-fact tone.

"During my time working for the border guards, I dealt with these guys, and they have the power to surpass the Ukrainian government if they're not careful. In fact, some of them will honestly claim that the reason the Ukrainian economy is somehow running, even though it should have collapsed long ago according to official figures, is because of the hidden earnings of these guys. And as long as they're paid enough, these guys will take on any job. Of course, high-risk jobs demand high compensation, but once a contract is made, they rarely betray. They'll ignore laws arbitrarily made by the state, but they also have their own rules that they must not break, and they maintain their integrity."

"However, in most cases, members of illegal organizations are very suspicious. Once a contract is made, they may keep their good faith, but if you don't have an introducer they trust, you probably won't even be able to make contact, let alone sign a contract," Zead asked Latona in a tone full of reality, likely because he had come into contact with some illegal organization during his time in the special forces. "Latona, do you have any concrete means of contact with illegal organizations in Ukraine?"

"I don't know if it's still effective, but I do have a method. However, it's not a method that I created myself," Latona said, giving a wry smile.

"Although there are no records of it anywhere, my father had ties to illegal

organizations in Ukraine. Specifically, he was a contact for smugglers in Zaftra."
"Huh?" I couldn't help but look at Latona, my eyes widening. I remember hearing that her mother was a hero in the Zaftra army, a local notable with the rank of honorary colonel, and well-connected with the upper echelons of the army...

"Did your mother know about that?"

"My mother knew all about it," Latona answered very calmly.

"I don't know the details of how my father and mother met, or how they ended up getting married. However, it seems that when they met, my father was already a member of a smugglers' organization, and my mother was a soldier recognized for her achievements in the Zaftra military. Normally, even if romantic feelings blossomed between them, I don't think that relationship would bear fruit, but the two of them got married, stayed together until my father passed away, and did not fall apart socially. Looking back, I think that my mother probably took the initiative and did a pretty cunning job of covering up the affair."

"Ah..." It was amazing, or perhaps I should say, that my mother, who was already an outstanding person, was even more so. I was half-stunned and dazzled. Latona continued speaking in the same vein.

"To get back to the main topic, I remember that when my father was alive, Uncle Sergei from Nikolayev would visit us from time to time. I was young at the time, so I have the image of him as a very grown-up man, but I think he was probably in his thirties at most. This man was my father's business associate, or rather, his partner."

"So you're an illegal smuggler, then?" Hermes asked, sounding a little harsh, but Latona nodded quite calmly.

"That's true. However, members of illegal organizations usually have a public face. Uncle Sergei was a legitimate trader on the surface, and he must have been conducting legitimate business. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been able to enter Zaftra so openly."

"Well, I suppose so," groaned Hermes, and then Zead asked.

"So, how long did your interaction with this person last, and for how long?"

"My relationship with Uncle Sergei completely ended after my father died. At least, I have no memory of seeing him after my father's death. Now that I think about it, Uncle Sergei didn't attend my father's funeral either. Maybe my mother refused," Latona said, shrugging.

"I don't know if Uncle Sergei is currently in Nikolayev, if he is still working as a smuggler, or even if he is still alive. To be honest, I'm not too sure if I can call this a

means, but illegal organizations, for better or worse, place great importance on blood ties. If I went to Nikolayev and said I was Vasilev's daughter, I might be able to be more receptive than if I hadn't."

"Still, it's much better than nothing," Zead said firmly, as if the decision had already been made.

"Plus, if they had a close relationship up until recently, there's a high risk that they'll be discovered by the Zaftra authorities. A relationship that was severed more than ten years ago without any grudge is ideal in some ways."

"Well, I don't know if there was any resentment between my mother and Uncle Sergei," Latona replied with a wry smile, as if she had just remembered something.

"However, I think it's safe to say that the Zaftra military is probably unaware of the work my father and Uncle Sergei were doing. If they were aware of it but were now refusing to make it public, there's no way I, who volunteered for the border guards, would have been assigned to the border with Ukraine. In fact, I had no contact with any illegal organizations while I was in the border guards. My background may have been reexamined after I defected to the EC, but I don't think they would have suspected me again of being related to Ukraine."

"Okay then, let's head to Nikolayev," Zead declared again, looking around the group.

"Does anyone have any objections?"

"Of course I didn't object. I had no alternative, and in fact, I knew full well that it was the course of action most likely to succeed," Hermes grumbled in a tone of mixed annoyance and pity.

"But I still don't feel comfortable relying on criminal organizations. I don't mean to say it's moral, but I feel uneasy knowing that I could betray them at any time."

"Well, actually, even before you think about being betrayed, the biggest problem is whether you can rely on a criminal organization in the first place," Bosch replied, as nonchalant as ever.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about it. We'll just have to pin our hopes on Latona's negotiating skills."

"Latona's negotiating skills. She had trouble with the people in charge of the arms company almost every day, but I wonder if she can negotiate with a criminal organization." Hermes sighed. "I don't think there's any point in worrying about that," I said, dazzled without saying a word. About three days after we crossed the Zaftra border. We managed to safely move to our destination near Nikolayev. I don't know if anyone saw us, but at least we weren't chased by the Ukrainian army or police, and the Wanzer didn't have a fatal breakdown and stop. I think we were really lucky.

However, we couldn't enter the city while riding in an armed Wanzer. So, first Latona got off the Wanzer and infiltrated the city alone, and we decided to hide and wait in the nearby forest. Even for Latona, acting alone in this situation was quite dangerous, but if we, foreigners, accompanied her, it would be more noticeable and negative. According to Latona's explanation, Nikolayev is a trading port, but it is far from being an international city, and it feels more like a small rural town where most of the residents know each other. Of course, Latona, a Zaftran, is also a stranger, but she can speak Ukrainian and it is much less strange than it feels for us. So Latona went out alone, and we waited patiently for her to contact us. Soon, Hermes, who is not good at waiting and has no patience, started complaining as expected. To be honest, I think she should just shut up and rest, since complaining is not going to change anything. However, from Hermes's point of view, staying silent would only increase her anxiety and tension, and she would not be able to rest. Zead doesn't particularly blame her, and Bosch seems to be going along with it dutifully, so I don't complain and focus on conserving as much as I can, even if I can't recover my strength. In reality, there was no telling when an emergency call would come from Latona and they would have to rush into Nikolayev city in a Wanzer to support or rescue her, so as a Wanzer pilot it was best to rest while you could. Then, about half a day had passed, and Hermes had finally quieted down, perhaps because she had run out of things to complain about, when Latona contacted him.

"I've come to an agreement with Uncle Sergei. I've agreed that I will pay him a reasonable amount of money and he will arrange for us to escape to EC territory. First, he will turn the trailer around and store our Wanzers in a warehouse in the city, so I will accompany him to our hideout location. I will contact you again when we get close. So, is there any problem on your side?"

"There are no particular problems. I'll wait for the next communication. That's all." Zead responded immediately, and Latona sounded a little relieved, although it might have been my imagination.

"Understood. I will contact you again later. That's all." With that, Latona hung up the phone, and Hermes spoke in a rather dejected voice.

"...The negotiations went well. Really?"

"We can't let our guard down just yet, but for now, we've taken a big step forward," said Zead, letting out a deep sigh.

"Having Latona there really helped me."

"I'm just a merchant. I don't aim to deceive people or take from them by force, and I certainly don't aim to break the law. However, I'm not like a so-called honest

merchant in that I will do whatever it takes to make a profit," Sergei Yosevlev Arsenov, a smuggler from Nikolayev known as "Uncle Sergei," told Zead in surprisingly fluent English.

"Unfortunately, in my country, Ukraine, there is little chance that a merchant who only respects the laws of the country and does not take advantage of the opportunity to rob the unsuspecting, defenseless, or hostile is likely to survive. In that sense, Ukraine may be considered a lawless country in comparison with other large countries where the rule of law and the state are firmly established. But we must live in this country, in our own way. If you make a contract with us, pay us a price, and ask for our help, then you will follow our ways."

"Understood. This is your land, and we are merely passing through. If you can guarantee a safe escape to EC territory, I will follow your instructions," Zead replied politely. Sergei then nodded with a serious expression.

"That's fine. Then, until the arrangements for your escape are made, I would ask you to try not to appear in public as much as possible. Foreigners stand out in Nikolayev, and there's no telling where an unexpected incident might occur. It's best to stay hidden and not attract attention," Sergei said, and then paused for a moment, as if he was thinking deeply.

"Your Wanzers will be stored in the warehouse attached to the repair factory near the pier. The floors above are used as offices and living quarters, so feel free to stay there if you like. It won't be as comfortable as a hotel, but I've heard that Wanzer pilots feel uneasy if their beloved machines aren't nearby.

"Yes, that's true. Thank you for your consideration," replied Zead, and Sergei looked at me and added somewhat hesitantly.

"However, sleeping on the upper floors of a warehouse may be a little difficult for young women, although it may be fine for the men. If you'd like, how about we get a separate room in a hotel?"

"Thank you for your concern. But there's no need for it. I'm a Wanzer pilot too, so I feel uneasy if I'm not close to my unit," I said, giving a grin. I don't think Sergei meant it otherwise, but being separated from the other members would be troublesome. Then Latona added with a wry smile.

"Uncle, Elsa is a die-hard soldier, just like me. If you're worried about her, you should worry about me too."

"Well, it's not that I'm not worried about you. If you want, I can get you a hotel room, too," Sergei said, shaking his head a little exaggeratedly.

"But you probably think it's better to be with Wanzer, don't you?"

"Yes, that's right, uncle," Latona replied with a light laugh, and then Zead asked Sergei in a serious tone.

"By the way, as you can see, our Wanzer has sustained considerable damage and needs to be repaired immediately. We will of course pay for it, but could you please arrange for replacement parts?"

"That's right. If the part is in stock at the factory, we will sell it to you at cost, so you can use it for the repair. However, if we need to order a part that we don't have on hand, we'll need to estimate how much it will cost and how much time it will take," Sergei added, looking a little wary.

"To be honest, the Wanzers you are using are a type never seen before in Ukraine, so it may be difficult to find perfectly matching parts."

"Yes, I understand that. In this situation, we have no reason to ask for more. We will adjust it as best we can with the parts we can get our hands on," Zead replied calmly, then looked at Hermes.

"And so, this is where you'll be able to fully utilize your tuning skills. I look forward to working with you."

"Um, well, first let's check which parts we can actually use, and then we'll come back," Hermes replied, a little taken aback by the sudden request. Then Zead turned to Sergei and said,

"Well then, I would like to move to the warehouse. I'm sorry for the inconvenience, but thank you for your help."

"I'm amazed. There's a mountain of usable parts here," Hermes groaned in genuine surprise as she headed to the warehouse and immediately began checking the stock of parts.

"Because of the location, I was prepared to have to go to great lengths to install the ZAFTRA parts, which are difficult to adjust. But it turns out they have a good stock of Iguchi parts, even high-performance types. They also have a decent amount of repair equipment, so it's not that different from working at Durandal HQ." Oceania "Iguchi Corporation is the OCU company that makes Quint, right?" I asked, and Hermes nodded slightly.

"That's right. Although they may be called mediocre, they mainly manufacture Wanzers with a solid design that even beginners can operate without difficulty. The parts don't have many quirks, so they're perfect for temporary replacement and repair." Oceania Parts Here

"But how come Wanzer parts made by an OCU company are so readily available in Nikolayev?" Latona glared, tilting her head to the side, and Hermes shrugged

somewhat exaggeratedly.

"You should ask Sergei directly about that. Maybe they have some special procurement route. Well, Iguchi seems to have inherited a large part of the sales network of the bankrupt Sakata Industries, so it might have something to do with that."

"Hmm," Latona frowned slightly, but said nothing more. Then Zead spoke to the group.

"For now, leave the repairs and adjustments to Hermes and everyone else should get some rest. Hermes, you too, don't push yourself too hard. If you need any help, please let me know right away."

"Yeah, I know. It won't be as difficult as we thought it would be, and I'll rest once we have a general idea of how the work will go," Hermes replied, and we left her and went upstairs to the upper floor of the warehouse. Upstairs there was a room with a desk, a large dining kitchen, a toilet and shower room, and three small rooms, each with two bunks and lockers. It was quite bleak, but at least it was clean, and the atmosphere vaguely reminiscent of a barracks was rather familiar to us.

"To be honest, I never expected to receive such kindness," I told Latona, who was naturally sharing my room with me, as I sat on my bed.

"Even if they could eventually arrange for us to escape, I was prepared to be disarmed and placed under house arrest until the negotiations were concluded. But I'm not sure if it's really okay to let them even repair our Wanzers."

"Actually, that's not all," Latona said, shrugging with a wry smile.

"Normally, in a deal like this, at least half the value must be paid on the spot in cash or precious metal, or else negotiations won't even begin. But of course, we didn't have that much money. So I was prepared to give away, if not all five of the Wanzers, then two or three of them, which were the only ones we owned that looked valuable. But Uncle Sergei said that the payment could be sent by wire transfer from England. Apparently he has an account in Switzerland or somewhere, but either way, this is an exceptionally generous offer."

"I wonder if that's because your father and Sergei were friends?" I asked, and Latona replied with a somewhat faraway look in her eyes.

"That may be true, but it seems that Uncle Sergei had a special respect for my mother. As soon as he saw me, he said that I looked just like my mother when she was young, and he even attended my mother's funeral, which I was unable to attend, and he told me stories about it. Perhaps they had some kind of relationship that I didn't know about, or maybe something happened in the past and he has always had

special feelings for her.

"I see." Sergei-san, how should I put it, seems to have quite a romantic side to him, I thought, so I nodded. Then Latona gave a bitter smile again and continued.

"But still, you shouldn't underestimate Uncle Sergei. I didn't understand it back then, but now I can clearly see how amazing he is as a leader of an organization. I told Zead clearly that he shouldn't even try to outwit him."

"That's true. For the time being, we have no other intention than to safely escape to EC territory. There's no point in making a fuss," I replied, and Latona suddenly sighed.

"Really, there was no need to warn Elsa about this. I think the person who needs to be warned the most is Hermes, but I have a feeling that she might be repelled, so I guess I'll just have to leave it to Zead."

"Well, I don't think he'll complain so much if we can get the Wanzer repairs and adjustments done smoothly," I said, intentionally speaking lightly. Latona nodded, furrowing her brows.

"Well, I don't think Hermes will be so rash as long as she has a job to do. I think it will be after that that she'll get into any trouble."

"After that," I said silently, "I'd like to have a clear idea of when I can leave the country by the time the Wanzer repairs and adjustments are finished."

"It looks like the USN is serious about going to war with the EC," Zead groaned, looking at the front page of the newspaper article about the USN's Atlantic Fleet leaving the naval base in Florida loaded with Wanzers for amphibious assaults. Five days had passed since we arrived in Nikolayev, and the repairs and adjustments to the Wanzers had long ago been completed. Sergei seemed to be carefully searching for a way to get us out of the country, but there was still no concrete prospect of doing so. And according to the English newspaper delivered to our hideout above the warehouse every morning, tensions between the USN and the EC were rising day by day while we were wandering from Zaftra to Ukraine. It seems that a press blackout was imposed on the pipeline explosion, and the only article published was that the Zaftra authorities were investigating both the accident and the terrorist attack, but when it came to conflicts between other countries that were not directly related to the New Continent, they seemed to take their reports from USN and EC news agencies, and the reports were surprisingly detailed. By the way, there was a television in the hideout, but the news programs were, naturally, in Ukrainian, both in audio and on the screen, so we mainly got our information from English-language newspapers.

"I thought it was pretty dangerous when the statements of a shady bunch like the Madeira Free Independence Congress were published in Ukrainian newspapers. The fleet has already started moving." Zead put the newspaper he had picked up on the table and glared at him with a sad look on his face. By the way, the Madeira Free Independence Congress is an organization that was formed when some of the people who had tried to make Madeira independent from Portugal in the past but failed, defected to the USN, and even though the leadership has changed, they are still actively campaigning for Madeira independence. I think that such a movement is an individual's freedom, but for some reason this organization has a lot of funds of unclear origin, and is actively running an anti-EC campaign to incite Madeira independence through the USN media. From the EC's perspective, it is a very shady entity, but it seems to be recognized as a fairly powerful political organization in the USN. And according to Frederick Lancaster's information, almost all of the leaders of this organization are Zaftra's minions.

"The one appointed to command the fleet is Vice Admiral Maddox, Chief of the Navy. If he so wished, he has brought in a big shot who could govern the occupied territory. So your aim is to occupy Madeira Island, after all," Bosch replied, and Hermes spat it out with a sour look on her face.

"Sheldon Lee Maddox is not a staunch warlord, but he is said to be the most politically adept of the USN Navy. In other words, he is a cunning strategist with no set views, always trying to read the winds and take an advantageous position. To be honest, I don't like typical military men, but I dislike these guys who are unclear whether they are military men or bureaucrats even more."

"But it says there's also a chance that the Atlantic Fleet's purpose for setting sail could be to rescue Venezuela, where the struggle for independence has been dragging on longer than expected. But it doesn't seem to have been decided one hundred percent that they're coming to occupy Madeira," I pointed out after quickly reading the article, and Latona shook her head with a complicated look on her face.

"Well, I read an article here that says the Madeira Free and Independent Congress has built its own armed ship and set sail from New York. This is almost certainly linked to the movements of the Atlantic Fleet. Also, a Venezuela relief fleet doesn't need to be commanded by the Secretary of the Navy, and there's no need to mobilize the entire Atlantic Fleet in the first place. This seems to suggest that they are planning to occupy and take control of Madeira, even if it means fighting the EC combined fleet.

"The EC's response seems slow. Well, they still don't know where the troops that

attacked the German military base and the new resource areas in Poland are hiding, so it's not hard to understand why they can't mobilize all their forces to defend Madeira. With each passing moment, it seems like the situation is moving in the direction we wanted to avoid," Hermes asked anxiously as Zead groaned with a solemn expression.

"And yet we're stuck in Nikolayev. I wonder what we could have done in England. But we certainly can't do anything in Nikolayev. And are the arrangements for leaving still not in order?"

"The biggest problem is not how to leave Ukraine without being blamed, but how to enter the EC without being blamed. Mr. Sergei is looking into various ways, but it seems that it's not going to be that easy," Zead explained in a tone that seemed patient, repeating the same thing for the past few days. In fact, if we tried to enter EC territory from Ukraine without any disguise, we would be arrested immediately by the authorities at the place of entry. It would be even more troublesome if we were to add conditions such as staying in an armed Wanzers. So, like when we entered Ukraine from Zaftra, we were thinking of illegally crossing the border into EC territory at a suitable place, having a Durandal transport plane come there, and escaping by air, but in that case, there is a possibility of a fight if we don't make arrangements with the border guards and air forces of both Ukraine and the EC countries. And while Sergei's organization seems to be able to turn a blind eye to a certain extent to Ukrainian customs and the guards stationed at the border checkpoints, it has almost no influence over the border guards, air force, and especially the regular EC army.

"When I spoke with Sergei last night, he suggested that it might be easier to escape by sea. If we were to load five Wanzers onto a large trailer and try to enter EC territory by land, it would inevitably stand out near the border, but if we load them onto a ship, there's no problem. If we go out to international waters and land the Wanzers on an uninhabited small island or something, and have a transport plane come over, there's no need to worry about being intercepted. If we're on a large ship, we can just land the transport plane on the deck, which would be even easier."

"Yes, I think the idea of traveling by sea has been floated for a while. But I remember the discussion was about how it was difficult to arrange a suitable ship?" Hermes asked, and Zead nodded with a somewhat complicated look on his face.

"Yes, that's right. Sergei's organization does not own a ship, and of the business partners that do have ships, there are currently no ones who are trustworthy and capable enough to entrust us with. However, yesterday Sergei received word that a

business partner's ship that was not scheduled to arrive at this time had suddenly decided to dock at Nikolayev Port. What's more, they have requested to do business immediately. The ship is a large armed cargo ship equipped with a hangar for Wanzers, so there is no problem with its capabilities, but Sergei seems to be a little unsure about whether or not he can trust the ship."

"Don't you think that an opponent who is capable but untrustworthy is extremely dangerous?" Bosch prodded in a very serious tone. Zead nodded again.

"Yes, I thought the same. That's why I told Sergei last night that I didn't want to be introduced to someone I couldn't trust. However, with the relationship between the EC and the USN deteriorating so rapidly, I feel that it might be best to hurry back home, even if it means accepting some risks."

"That's a decision that the leader has to make. We won't know whether it will pay off or backfire until we try," Latona said with a serious expression.

"If Uncle Sergei had thought that the ship owner was completely unreliable, he would not have approached us in the first place. He must have come to ask for advice because he was unsure whether he could trust the ship owner."

"However, once we're on board, our fate is practically in the hands of the ship owner. No matter how urgent the situation may be, if we entrust our services to a shady source, at worst, it could all end in disaster," Bosch said cautiously, and for some reason Hermes asked me a question.

"What do you think, Elsa?"

"That's true. Putting aside the question of whether or not we will ultimately make a deal, why don't we meet the ship owner in person? I don't think there's much point in asking whether or not we can trust someone we've never met," I said, and Zead nodded before Hermes, who had asked the question.

"That's true. I'll ask Sergei if I can meet the ship owner," said Zead, and went into the office next door. There was a phone on the desk in this room, which connected directly to Sergei's office. Since it had been fitted with security measures against wiretapping, he had been told to always use this phone for contact. Zead then picked up the phone and spoke for a bit, before quickly returning to the kitchen.

"When I told Sergei that I wanted to meet the ship owner, he asked me to appraise the Wanzer. Apparently, the ship owner claims to have brought an extremely rare and valuable Wanzer that is not yet on the market, but I don't know how much I can trust him. So, we decided to meet in person tonight and negotiate whether to buy it, but he also asked us to be present and appraise the ship owner's Wanzer. After all, we are Wanzer experts.

"Hmm, that's getting a bit interesting," Hermes said, her eyes sparkling behind her glasses.

"Of course, it's top secret which companies are currently developing what kind of Wanzers, but we can guess roughly what level they will be producing. If they bring out an old prototype Wanzer that never made it into mass production, we'll know right away, and if we can see a really rare, cutting-edge model, we'd like to ask them to let us see it."

"So, there will be no problem if we are present tonight when Sergei and the ship owner meet to negotiate. Hermes, Latona, and Elsa accompany me. Bosch, wait here just in case," Zead instructed, and we agreed without objection. Then, in the evening, Sergei sent a car to pick us up, and we headed for the warehouse, located about halfway around the port. It was a distance that we could easily walk to without having to take a car, but Sergei seemed worried about being seen by anyone while we were traveling. Eventually, the car entered the warehouse, and the driver guided us inside after we got out. The driver did not speak English, and could only converse with Latona, who spoke Ukrainian.

"It seems to be this way," Latona said, following the driver up the stairs. This warehouse seems to have roughly the same structure as the one we use, with the upper floors serving as offices and living quarters.

"Hey, isn't there a Wanzer in this warehouse?" Hermes muttered as she chased after Latona, followed by Zead and me. Hermes seemed to be already preoccupied with appraising the Wanzer, but Latona, Zead, and I also walked cautiously, watching for any signs of something unusual. Fortunately, nothing happened and we arrived on the upper floor. In the office were Sergei, two tall, burly men who seemed to be bodyguards, and three men of Asian descent. One of the Asian men was a middle-aged man with an unattractive impression, but the remaining two were agile-looking young men with sharp, alert eyes.

"Judging from his age, I wonder if this middle-aged man is the owner of the ship in question? He seems a bit absent-minded, but you can't really tell someone's name just by their appearance..." As I stared blankly at the sight, without saying anything, Sergei introduced me in a calm tone.

"Thank you for coming. This is Mr. Elgar, a Wanzer specialist, and his staff. This is Mr. Chang, the owner of Bichu Shipping, and his nephews."

"I'm Zhang Fei-jiang. Pleased to meet you," he introduced himself in heavily accented English, and Zhang held out his hand. Taking it, Zead introduced himself as well.

"I'm Gideon Elgar. Nice to meet you." After they shook hands, Sergei asked Chang, "So, let me see this precious Wanzer for myself. Where is it?"

"It's armed and heading your way. It'll be at the back entrance of the warehouse shortly," Chang replied calmly.

"We won't sell you a Wanzer that doesn't work. Don't worry."

"This is my hometown. I'd rather not attract attention by wandering around the harbor in a Wanzer," Sergei growled, frowning, and Chang replied more calmly than ever.

"No, no, don't worry. It's night, and there's no one around. We'll make sure to check the situation before starting the Wanzer."

"Even so..." Sergei was about to complain further when a beeping sound was heard and Chang took out a strangely large portable communicator from an inside pocket of his jacket. With the communicator in hand, Chang made a short message in what was probably Chinese, then proudly told Sergei.

"The Wanzer has arrived safely. There are no problems. Can you open the shutter at the back entrance please?"

"Let's go downstairs," Sergei said, and left the room with his bodyguards. Chang's group followed shortly after, and we followed them. Then, the back door of the warehouse was opened, and a Wanzer that had been waiting outside came in.

"What is this?" we all screamed in unison the moment we saw the Wanzer coming in.

"It's a Wanzer from the assault team! No doubt about it!"

"Yes, there's no mistaking it. The paint seems a little different though," Sergei asked nervously as Latona groaned.

"A raiding party? What do you mean?"

"You've heard the news about the mysterious Wanzer units attacking German military bases and facilities in new resource areas in Poland, right, uncle? We fought against that raiding force in Poland, and the Wanzers they used to be the same as these," Latona explained, and both Sergei and Chang's eyes widened at the same time.

"Chan! I can't believe it, but did you procure a Wanzer from the unit that attacked the EC?"

"No, that's not true! That can't be true! I got this Wanzer in South America!" Sergei pressed him, and Chang cried out in a panic. At that moment, Hermes interjected.

"South America? Where in South America?"

"It's in Venezuela. The port of Cumaná in Venezuela. There's no way the unit that attacked EC would be in a place like that?" Hearing Chang's answer, Hermes looked

shocked and groaned.

"Well, there is a reason for that. The unit that attacked the EC was a special operations unit of Zaftra, and Frederick Lancaster had speculated that Zaftra was behind the Venezuelan independence struggle. As I thought, Zaftra had intended to disrupt the EC and present it as bait in front of the greedy USN, and then take Venezuela while the USN was distracted by the EC!"

"It appears to be some sort of scheme," Zead agreed solemnly, then turned to Sergei and Chang.

"This is certainly a valuable Wanzer. As a machine, it is a state-of-the-art machine manufactured by Dmitri Corporation that the Zaftra military rarely takes outside, but even more than that, it is extremely valuable as physical evidence of the international conspiracy. However, on the other hand, Zaftra, the mastermind behind the plot, will attempt to eliminate this machine and anyone who knows of its existence as quickly as possible. In that sense, it is more than just valuable, it is dangerous. So, Mr. Chang, please sell this machine to us. We belong to the EC Land Tactics Research Institute, Durandal. If we use this machine as evidence to expose Zaftra's plot, there will be no need to target those who know of the machine's existence."

"Th-Th-That's too sudden..." Chang muttered, looking flustered. His nephews, who were following him, stepped forward with grim expressions, as if to protect their uncle. In response, Sergei's bodyguards also quickly stepped forward to protect their boss. But at that moment... Suddenly, behind them, a tremendous roar was heard as machine gun fire rang out on the shutters at the front entrance of the warehouse.

"Wh-what is it?" Everyone turned around in shock, and at the same time, the shirt was torn apart without a moment's hesitation, and a somewhat small, but terribly sinister-looking jet-black Wanzer came charging in, machine gun in hand. The moment Sergei caught sight of it, his expression cringing, he shouted.

"The Zaftra military secret police? Why are they here?"

"We can think about that later! Everyone, run!" Latona yelled, and everyone ran towards the back door. Meanwhile, the Zaftra-made Wanzer that Chang had brought along was unfortunately not equipped with a weapon, but it boldly advanced and charged at the secret police Wanzer. A harsh metallic sound rang out, and the Wanzer that was hit rolled over surprisingly easily. However, from behind it, another jet-black Wanzer entered through a breach in the Wanzer and began firing its machine gun without question. Then I realized something terrible and shouted at Chang.

"That's not good! If that Wanzer receives too much damage, it will self-destruct without ejecting the pilot! If the pilot doesn't escape on his own, he won't be able to escape and will be burned to death!"

"Aiya!" Chang hastily took out his handheld communicator and shouted in rapid-fire Chinese. The Wanzer that had been hit and flipped over had already regained its balance, and the Wanzer that had come all the way from South America was now coming under fire from two enemy aircraft. As I held my breath, wondering if we'd make it in time, the back of the Wanzer that was under fire suddenly slid open with a bang, and the small pilot jumped out.

"Now, hurry!" I jumped to the floor, helped the rolling pilot up, and we ran to the back door of the warehouse. But the moment we got outside, a huge explosion occurred behind us, probably because the Wanzer had self-destructed, and we fell flat on the ground.

"Are you okay, Elsa?"

"Th-something?" I answered Latona's worried voice, raising my head. Next to me, Chang and his nephews were surrounding the pilot who had managed to escape. But there was no time to relax. Just when I thought the plane had been crushed in the suicide bombing, two jet-black Wanzers came circling around the burning warehouse, illuminating the surrounding area with their searchlights. To my irritation, there didn't seem to be any noticeable damage.

"Let's get away! If we don't get in the Wanzer, there's no point!" Latona yelled, dragging me to my feet. I got up with all my might, and Latona and I both started running. I was curious as to where Zead, Hermes, and Sergei had gone, and which way Chan and the others had fled, but I didn't have time to look. Then, perhaps having spotted someone, or simply as a threat, or perhaps hoping for a lucky hit, the secret police Wanzer began firing wildly. It didn't seem to be aimed at us, but a cold sweat broke out all over my body. At that moment, from the direction we were heading, a Wanzer with machine guns in both hands came charging towards us. It wasn't a rugged silhouette like a Zaftra-made Wanzer. It was a slender, obviously agile Wanzer.

"It's a Tatoo! It's Bosch! Thank goodness!" Latona cried out in joy. Zead had probably sent an emergency call. Bosch, who had been waiting, immediately activated his own machine and came to the rescue. The secret police's Wanzer immediately began firing at the new Wanzer that was charging at them, but Bosch's machine immediately saw through it and nimbly dodged it. If it had legs attached, not to mention hover legs, there was no way that someone with the skill to dodge

even the shots of a normal Wagner would be able to be hit by a ZAFTRA army Wanzer. Meanwhile, Bosch's machine's shots accurately hit the enemy machine, and both of the small, thinly armored secret police Wanzers immediately burst into flames and halted. Perhaps they had been caught in the crossfire of the suicide bombing and had been damaged somewhere. And, unlike the machines of the special undercover task force, it seems that the Wanzers of the Zaftra military secret police are not equipped with self-destruct mechanisms as standard, and the two stalled Wanzers eject their pilots. However, a large number of men, who we don't know where they came from, rushed around the cockpits that had been ejected, as if they were swarming. Latona and I looked at each other for a moment, but we quickly followed the men to where they were gathered. We saw a pilot in a jet black uniform being dragged out of the cockpit and disarmed at gunpoint. Then, a man dressed in a similar outfit, probably a pilot from another cockpit, was being taken away by several men. Then, Sergei, accompanied by his bodyguard, came out of the crowd and asked one of the pilots something in what seemed to be Zaftra language.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm asking why you broke into that warehouse. The secret police man denies that he has anything to tell them... But... Ah!" At that moment, Latona turned pale and was speechless. Sergei pulled out a gun and casually shot the pilot between the eyes. Then, in a very matter-of-fact tone, Sergei turned to the other pilot and asked the same question. Witnessing his colleague being shot, the other pilot replied in a low voice. Latona, hearing what he was saying, translated in a low voice.

"Apparently, the Wanzer that Chang activated emitted an identification signal reserved for special forces as soon as it was activated. The military secret police apparently rushed over after receiving an identification signal that shouldn't have been emitted in a place like this, wondering what on earth had happened. The military secret police are guaranteed the right to investigate not only within Zaftra, but also in vassal states with which they have agreements... Ah!" Again, Latona was speechless. Sergei had suddenly shot and killed the pilot who was answering questions. Then, looking towards us, he said with a sad look on his face.

"Latona. I know that you Wanzer pilots have an unspoken rule not to kill pilots who escape when their unit is destroyed. However, before they are Wanzer pilots, these guys are members of the Zaftra military secret police. Whether they talk or not, we have no choice but to kill them. If we let them live, it will certainly be the ruin of all of us. Understand that."

"Yes, I can understand it rationally," I replied calmly on behalf of the speechless Latona.

"You have a responsibility to your organization. You can't be dwelling on personal sentiment."

"I'm glad you understand," Sergei replied, not sounding very pleased.

"We will take care of the rest. You should get on Chang's boat and leave Nikolayev quickly. If the secret police come to investigate, they will find that foreigners arrived on a boat, suddenly unloaded their vans and started fighting. We locals were so busy running away that we had no idea what was going on."

"Will that excuse be accepted?" Latona asked in a strained voice, to which Sergei replied with a sad smile.

"It may not be accepted in Zaftra, but this is a foreign country. There is no evidence to prove that our explanation is a lie, and even the Zaftra military secret police cannot detain or arrest people without evidence. And the Ukrainian authorities will undoubtedly support the theory that the fighting is being carried out by unidentified foreigners."

"I see...but can we trust Chang?" Latona asked again, and Sergei nodded with confidence this time.

"It'll be fine. If that happens, we're in this together. Besides, your daughter helped Chan's family when they were aboard the Wanzer, right? Those people may not follow the law, but they do follow their obligations. They wouldn't do anything to harm someone who has benefactor-like to them, unless it was absolutely necessary."

"I see," Latona said, stepping forward in front of Sergei with a look of understanding on her face.

"Uncle, I may never get another chance, so I'll say it now. Thank you so much. Thanks to you, my friends and I have somehow managed to escape death. I've caused you a lot of trouble, but I'll never forget your kindness."

"What's so bothersome about it? What we signed with you was a legitimate business contract, as per market rates. Besides, even if you hadn't come, Chang would have brought in a dangerous Wanzer, and the secret police would have certainly raided. In fact, you saved us," Sergei added with a grin.

"However, that doesn't mean I'll discount the fee we agreed on."

MISSION 10:

Iberia Megafloat

" Yes, meeting Renges at the port of Cumaná was where things started to get bad," Chang told me, soon after our boat departed Nikolayev in a hurry. When I asked him for more details on how he ended up buying a Zaftra-made Wanzer in Venezuela, Chang told me with a wry smile.

"Renges is a USN NCO who drives a Wanzer, and he's a man who skillfully disguises military equipment and sells it on the black market. We've known each other for a long time. Renges told me that he'd been called up to help put down the Venezuelan independence struggle, and that he thought he could give me a lot of equipment that had been lost in battle, so I set off for the port of Cumaná in Venezuela. Well, even if it weren't for Yakko-san's incident, weapons and supplies sell for high prices in conflict zones. Unlike the EC and the like, import regulations are relaxed in South America, so as a merchant, you can't overlook that. The New Continent However, the USN army's advance was much slower than expected. When I arrived in Cumaná, there was no sign of the USN army at all. I thought they'd marched all the way to Cumaná and then come to the Karako. I thought they were surrounding Kass, but it seems that the Venezuelan state army was fighting surprisingly well, following the orders of the governor who declared independence. So, I thought that if the USN army hadn't come, Renges wouldn't be able to come either, so I gave up on buying new goods and sold the weapons and supplies I had brought with me. I don't know if they were related to the state army or anti-government guerrillas, but a Venezuelan customer came and bought them at a high price. Up until that point, it was going well. However, while the USN army was still hesitating far away, Renges somehow showed up in Cumaná. He had two soldiers who he called his friends. I think they were called Darril and Chaeffer. I got it. I thought that these guys deserted the army because they were about to be found out for selling goods on the black market," Chang said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Sure enough, Renges said he wanted to leave Venezuela right away and asked me to take him out on his ship. I was also free to leave because my business had almost finished. But Renges said he wanted to load the three Wanzers and one container that they were carrying. I told him, "We've known each other for a long time. If you pay me, I'll put you on the ship without making a fuss. But if there's anything you want to load, bring it to the ship yourself." So Renges came to the wharf with the Wanzers and containers on a trailer, but to my surprise, it wasn't a USN military trailer, but a state army trailer. Well, that's why they probably didn't arouse suspicion when they entered Cumana, but where did you get that? It all seemed even more suspicious and dangerous, I thought. And at that moment, at the wharf of

Cumana port, another group was loading the Wanzers and They were in the middle of unloading supplies and had arbitrarily blocked off part of the road. I thought for sure they were mercenaries from OCU or somewhere like that who had been hired by the state army to help out, but it turned out to be the Zaftra army. So I told Renges to wait quietly until the road closure was over, but whoever made the mistake made a huge mistake and it turned into a huge mess. Renges and the others unloaded their Wanzers from the trailers and began fighting. They could do as they pleased, but I was in trouble when the Wanzers trying to stop them even boarded my ship. I managed to hit the first one with a hidden rocket launcher and knocked it down, but if they kept coming one after the other, I wouldn't be able to defend myself. I left Renges and the others fighting behind and forcibly left the pier. If they seized the ship, it would be all for nothing."

"I'm sure from the ship owner's point of view, fleeing quickly was the right thing to do, but the people who were left behind probably didn't think that way," Bosch retorted with a wry smile. Chang then sighed loudly and threw up his hands.

"Well, if the Renges and the others had started a battle for me, I wouldn't have left them behind so easily. But that's not the case. They came here on their own, and started a battle on their own. I have no obligation to join them and put myself in danger."

"Well, that's beside the point. The Wanzer you brought to Nikolayev is the one that came on board the ship in Cumaná and was brought down by a direct hit from a rocket cannon, right? It didn't seem to have much damage considering that, did they bother to repair it? Also, what happened to the pilot that was on board?" Latona asked, to which Chang replied very casually.

"The truth is, the rocket cannon that took a direct hit didn't detonate, but it seemed to have hit in a good spot, and the Wanzer flipped over and stopped moving. The explosive grenade cannon it was carrying was dented and no longer usable, but the Wanzer itself was barely scratched. We then opened the hatch from the outside and pulled the pilot out, and found that he had fainted from the impact. We wanted to talk to him once he regained consciousness, so we restrained his arms and legs, but carried him to the medical room. However, the moment he regained consciousness, he died. According to the ship's doctor, he had bitten into a poison that had been hidden in his teeth. There was no reason for him to have to die."

"...They always seem to want to hurry up and die," Latona asked, glaring at him with a bitter expression.

"So what happened to the pilot's body?"

"We checked to see if they had anything to indicate their affiliation or identity, but there was nothing. We don't know anything. We had no choice but to bury them at sea," Chan replied, and we looked at each other in surprise. Of course, Chan's feeling that we couldn't leave the body of an unknown foreigner on board for a long time was quite reasonable, and we had no authority to criticize them. Moreover, even if we had the authority, there would be no benefit in criticizing them now. However, even though we had been able to obtain a Wanzer of the same type as the assault force, the main body of the Wanzer self-destructed in Nikolayev, and the pilot's remains were at the bottom of the sea, leaving us with no physical evidence. In all fairness, I think we were lucky enough that all the members were able to escape from Zaftra safely, but it was quite disappointing as we had been able to obtain evidence from an unexpected route.

"So, in the end, all that's left is a broken explosive cannon," Zead said, half talking to himself, and Chang nodded slightly at the dazzling look in his eyes.

"That's right. But the explosive shell cannon wasn't made by Zaftra. I think it was a bore 36, which is quite common."

"Well, that's hardly evidence at all," sighed Hermes, as Latona groaned with a difficult look on her face.

"The Zaftra military insists on domestically producing the Wanzers themselves, but the weapons for the Wanzers are almost all foreign-made. If I recall correctly, most of them aren't domestically produced."

"Well, it's enough of an accomplishment that we now have the certainty that the Zaftra army is actively operating in Venezuela. It would be better if we could obtain physical evidence, but no matter what we bring, there will always be people who call it a fabrication," Zead said decisively, then turned to Chang and asked him a question.

"Well, I think it's about time to contact Durandal HQ and ask them to send a transport plane to pick us up, but can I use their communications equipment?"

"Ah, I think we'll probably be fine if we're this far out to sea. Just check with the communications engineer," Chang said, continuing with a straight face.

"Also, there is an additional charge for using the communication equipment. No matter how much of a benefactor you are, you need to keep your business dealings in order."

"I see. If we can use this, I guess it makes sense to charge an extra fee. As far as homemade communication systems go, this is pretty much the ultimate," Hermes exclaimed in admiration as she entered the ship's communications room. A young

Asian woman wearing glasses, who was probably a member of Chang's family and had been sitting in front of the radio, looked at Hermes with a surprised expression and asked in beautiful English.

"Oh, you understand?"

"Yeah, I know. They're using a scrambler to stop them from tracing their identities when they interrupt the satellite communications system, right? I think they're using some large communications dump as a dummy, and they change their disguise every time they send a message. It's not a ridiculous amount of money, but it's an elaborate system," Hermes replied quickly, and the woman who seemed to be a communications engineer smiled.

"Hmm, you seem to have quite an eye for this. Normally I would take the message and send it myself, but why don't you try using it yourself?"

"Of course, it's an honor," Hermes said, smiling back, as she sat in the seat the woman had offered her and began operating the machine.

"Okay, we've found a route that will take us to Durandal HQ. It's dangerous to communicate leisurely, so we'll send a message one way, but where should we plan to meet up?"

"That's right. If we send a transport plane to the Black Sea, there's a chance it will be caught in the air defense network of the Zaftra countries. It would be safer if the ship waited until it passed through the Bosphorus and entered Greek territorial waters," Zead groaned, looking thoughtful.

"Either way, we'll have no choice but to make contact once we get close. Would it be a bad idea to designate this ship to make the communication?"

"Well, Durandal is also being quite cautious about communications security. Just in case, it'd be best not to specify a channel that could lead to the identification of this ship," Hermes replied, and the ship's communications engineer next to her nodded. "It's common knowledge that communications between shady parties are scrambled multiple times, so we can deal with a direct communication here. But please, we'd appreciate an end to a raw communication from an amateur like you."

"Okay, then, let's have my Wanzer be the final recipient of this communication. That way, there won't be any trouble for this ship," Hermes said as she operated the keyboard. Suddenly, the communications engineer stopped her with a sharp voice.

"Wait a moment. No matter how powerful a Wanzer's communication device is, there's only a limited range, right? If you try to communicate outside that range, won't you be interrupting this ship's system and using it without permission?"

"Yes. Even if someone were to intercept and analyze the communications, this ship

would just be a victim who happened to be interrupted and had their communications system used without permission. I don't think we'll be subject to any serious prosecution... Oh, by the way, technically it will be unauthorized use, but we'll pay for the use of the system," Hermes hastily added, realizing what the other person was trying to say. The communications engineer then smiled and nodded. "OK, OK. As long as you pay the usage fee, there's no problem."

"Hmm. I know it's a little late to say this, but the power of money is great," Bosch groaned in a very serious tone. Hermes then sent a message to Durandal HQ, and then, following Zead's instructions, began the process of transferring funds from Durandal's bank account to Bichu Shipping's account, ostensibly for shipping fees. However, even after the process was complete, Hermes continued to stare at the computer screen connected to the communication device with a difficult expression on her face.

"What's wrong? Is there still something you want to do?" Zead asked, and Hermes answered, her eyes fixed on the display screen.

"It might be a waste of time, or maybe it's almost a waste of time, but I think we should try contacting Venezuela."

"Venezuela? Venezuela to who?" Latona asked in a shocked tone, and Hermes replied with a very sour look on her face, without moving her eyes from the screen. "It would be best if we could contact that bad USN NCO called Renges that Chang mentioned. He's engaged in direct combat with the Zaftra forces at Cumaná Port, after all. He might have some evidence."

"Well, that may be a possibility, but how would you contact them?" When I asked, Hermes turned around and began to explain.

"If we search for 'NCO Renges, a regular USN unit deployed to Venezuela,' we can immediately find out which unit he belongs to. It's not a very common name, and if there are multiple people with the same name, we can narrow it down to Darril and Chaeffer, and see if there are soldiers with those names in the same unit. We should be able to identify him without a doubt. And once we've identified his unit, we can contact him."

"But according to Chang, Renges seems to be a deserter who separated from the main force, right? Even if we contacted his unit, he wouldn't be there, would he?" Bosch pointed this out, and Hermes nodded with a bitter expression.

"That's the problem. I think there's a possibility that Renges, who was left behind by Chan whom he was counting on, would have no choice but to return to his original unit. Well, if you say that, there's also a possibility that he was attacked by the

Zaftra army in Cumaná."

"That's true. Well, as long as there are no specific disadvantages or dangers to be expected from contacting Venezuela, it doesn't matter if the chances of contacting them are slim. Even if it doesn't work, I think it would be worth a try, and if something does happen it would be an advantage," Latona said in a surprisingly candid tone, causing Hermes to widen her eyes.

"You think so?"

"Yeah. Whatever it is, I think it's better to try it than not to try it at all. But you have to be careful about managing the risks," Latona said, and Zead responded with a wry smile.

"There is always a risk involved in us contacting the US Navy's frontline forces directly. But contacting forces in Venezuela is too unexpected, so no one would be on guard. I think it's worth a try."

"Okay then, let's give it a try!" Hermes said in an encouraging tone and began typing on the keyboard.

"Renges...I wonder how it's spelled. I'm not sure about the pronunciation of "chan."

"This is RENGES, BILLY RENGES," the communications engineer instructed the dazzling Hermes.

"Thanks...but do you know Renges?" Hermes asked, and the communications engineer replied with an enigmatic smile.

"Of course I do. We've been business partners for a long time," she added, half to herself.

"Billy Renges is an incredibly tenacious guy. I don't know if he's in a place where I can contact him, but I don't think he's dead."

"Hmm..." With a somewhat unsatisfied look on her face, Hermes continued typing on the keyboard.

"Yes, there it is. Corporal Billy Renges from the 5th Squad of the 332nd Task Force, USN Regular Army. The leader of the 5th Squad is Sergeant Darril Traubel. The other squad member is Corporal Philip Chaeffer. There's no doubt about it, it's this trio."

"Hmm. Chaeffer seems to be practically a new recruit, but the two NCOs, Renges and Darril, have quite a long military career. Have they been piloting Wanzers all this time?" Latona asked, peering at the display screen. Hermes then brought up another piece of data and nodded.

"Apparently, that's the case. They were both trained as Wanzers from the start, and seem to have been a team ever since. They achieved considerable military success,

and have several medals. They also served in the security forces for a time, and Darril was promoted to special sergeant and provisionally commissioned as a warrant officer, but later received reprimand for disobeying orders and all of this was revoked. After that, they were both transferred from the security forces to regular forces, and since then they don't seem to have had any notable achievements or punishments."

"I see. I guess that's where he went astray," Latona said, dazzling with an expression of understanding.

"A skilled Wanzer NCO was scouted by the security forces for his achievements, but after clashing with his superiors he was punished and lost interest in the military. But he didn't quit, and instead just hung around, occasionally smuggling supplies on the black market while still brazenly staying in the army. Sure enough, these guys are so tenacious they wouldn't die even if you killed them."

"Yes, it seems obvious. There are people like that in every army," said Bosch, nodding next to him and sounding a little suspicious.

"But what made such a shrewd NCO suddenly want to leave the military, a place he was so familiar with? Even if he was found guilty of illegally diverting supplies, it wouldn't be a serious crime. At best he'd be sent to the barracks, or at worst he'd be dishonorably discharged. But deserting on the battlefield would mean, at worst, being shot for desertion before the enemy. Even if he managed to escape, he'd never be able to return to his homeland. I think the risks, the beatings and the swearing-off, were high."

"We'll have to ask Renges or Darril to find out. Well, I don't think they'll tell us anything even if we asked, but I think the container they were trying to bring onto the ship with the Wanzer is suspicious," Latona said confidently.

"Maybe they came across some treasure by chance – gold, art, or a prototype for a new weapon – that would allow them to live a comfortable life if they brought it to the right place. Even if they reported to their superiors that they had found something like this, they would just be told "well done" and that would be the end of it. I can understand the psychology of wanting to take a gamble and run away with it."

"...I'm a little surprised you can understand those people without criticizing them," Hermes glared at Latona, who snorted.

"What are you talking about? I am the daughter of a hero and a respected officer, but I abandoned the Zafra army and fled to the EC. I am a complete failure as a soldier. If you belong to an army that doesn't adequately reward you for risking your

life for it, any sane person would scream and run away the moment they got the chance."

"My, that hurts my ears," groaned Zead with a wry smile.

"Well, even if Renges or Darril were deserters of the USN military and had been dishonest misappropriates of property, as long as they could bring useful information, Durandal has no problem with that. If they ask for protection or help with their escape, we should do whatever we can."

"Of course, if we can't get in touch, there's no point in protecting or supporting them," Hermes said, tapping away at the keyboard.

"Okay, I've got the 332nd Task Force's official communications channel. Should I send a message or make a call?"

"Making a phone call is way too risky. We don't even know who's on the other end," Latona said, frowning.

"I'm asking for contact from Darril, Renges, and Chaeffer. I think we should send a simple message saying that we are ready to assist them, and put the Hermes Wanzers in as a contact. Even if they managed to evade the Zaftra forces in Cumaná, they're probably in a tight spot now, with no way to escape. Once the message gets through, they'll be contacting us as if they're grasping at straws."

"But, how can I put it, it's a really suspicious message. If I were you, even if I was in real trouble, I don't think I would feel the need to contact you," Bosch commented, to which Latona lightly retorted.

"But you can't just say that the EC Land Tactical Research Institute Durandal is looking for information on the Zaftra Army special operations unit deployed in Venezuela and ask to be contacted, can you? Well, I don't think the Renges are as cautious as Bosch. If Bosch were in their position, he wouldn't cause trouble at the port of Cumaná and end up being left behind by Chang."

"More importantly, I don't know what kind of treasure it is, but there's no way I'd leave the army in the middle of a battle with such valuables. I'm a coward, after all," Bosch said, shrugging. Then Hermes turned around and asked Zead.

"I don't know. I think messaging is safer than calling."

"That's right. If we want to send a message, we'll have to do as Latona said, and use an unclear, ambiguous message. But we need to be very careful about that, because there's a chance that we might get in touch with someone other than the intended recipient," Zead said, tilting his head thoughtfully.

"Now that I think of it, how are calls addressed to your Wanzer handled? You don't have to get on the Wanzer to receive them, do you? Do you have them automatically

forwarded to your mobile phone?"

"Oh, of course," Hermes replied, and Zead nodded, his expression serious.

"I see. In that case, I know this may not be what you want, but I want you to change the settings so that any communication addressed to your Wanzer is forwarded to all of our mobile devices at once. If it's a communication from the Durandal transport, we might be able to make it wait a little, but if a call request comes in from Venezuela while you're deep asleep, you might end up regretting it later."

"...I see. It certainly wouldn't be a good idea for me to be solely responsible for receiving the signal." Hermes nodded and gave a wry smile.

"In the worst case scenario, the 332nd Mobile Company may be defeated by the Zaftra military and the radio operator may be captured. And it's not impossible that the Zaftra side, having obtained the recorded message, may send a probing transmission. Well, if that happens, we may be able to obtain useful data, but we need to be extremely careful in how we respond. At the very least, we shouldn't communicate while half asleep."

"Yes, that's right," Zead replied with a serious look on his face. And Hermes began to type on the keyboard again with furious vigor.

"Okay, then I'll send a message to the 332nd Mobile Squadron in Venezuela. And we'll prepare ourselves to respond to any message that comes our way, no matter who it is. Now all we have to do is wait for a response."

My handheld radio emitted a ringtone indicating it was in talk mode, and without thinking much about it, I pressed the communication button almost reflexively and answered.

"yes?"

"Is that you? You're the one who sent the misleading message saying you're ready to help. I'm Darril, one of the three people named in the message," came the slightly low male voice from the handheld, which I'd never heard before. For a moment, I thought, "Oh no!", but now that I'd received the message, it was too late to ask another member to take over. I steeled myself and answered the handheld.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Elsa. I'm part of the group that sent you a message saying we're ready to help."

"I see. So, what kind of support are you guys going to give us?" The man who called himself Darril asked me directly, sounding a little impatient. I took a breath and answered as calmly as I could.

"If you want, I can help you escape the country, subject to certain conditions."

"Hmm... what are the conditions?" Darril asked as directly as possible. So I decided

to get straight to the point and ask him what I wanted to know.

"I heard that you engaged in a battle with the Zaftra army at the port of Cumaná. Did you capture their Wanzers or take their soldiers prisoner?"

"The Zaftra Army? Are they the Zaftra Army?" Darril exclaimed in surprise. It seemed he too didn't know who they were fighting. I answered back, raising my voice.

"Yes, it is definitely the Zaftra Army. However, we need physical evidence that it is the Zaftra Army that is there. If you have any evidence, we promise to provide as much support as possible in exchange."

"Well, unfortunately, we didn't have time to capture the Wanzers. They self-destruct as soon as they receive significant damage. And as for the prisoners... we took them, but they escaped." Darril's response made me sigh in disappointment. Then, it seemed he heard my sigh, because Darril immediately responded.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's still a chance. In a strange turn of events, we're going to launch a surprise attack on their base. We might find some evidence there."

"A surprise attack on the Zaftra army's base?" I was stunned by this unexpected turn of events.

"Just the three of you?"

"No, it's not like that. There have been a lot of things going on, so we're working together with some people. Well, we have a decent amount of fighting power, so there's no need to worry," Darril said in a fairly casual tone, although he might have been using that tone intentionally.

"So, if we find any evidence that would be useful, we'd like you to let us leave Venezuela in exchange. Could you send over a transport plane that can carry three or four Wanzers? With a pilot?"

"Yes, I think we can," I assured, thinking that the large transport planes at Durandal HQ should be more than capable of making the journey to Venezuela and back.

"However, since it would be trespassing, even if Venezuela is in a state of chaos and their air defenses are lax, we probably can't stay there for long. We'll only do it once, at the place and time you specify. If we make a mistake and are unable to meet, we'll just withdraw. It's also dangerous to communicate, so once we take off, there won't be any changes to our plans."

"Yes, that's fine. We can't put the transport plane in danger after all that effort," Darril replied understandably. Then, after a short pause, he continued.

"Hey, Elsa. You don't have to tell me if you can't tell me, but how on earth did you

guys find out about our situation? That we fought in Cumaná, that we were trying to leave the country..."

"I heard about that from Mr. Chang of Bichu Shipping," I replied, and Darril suddenly shouted in a high-pitched voice.

"Chan! You're the arms smuggler, Chan! That bastard, you ran off on your own, leaving us behind! What a terrible guy!"

"Well, I understand that you're angry, but it seems he has his own reasons. I heard that a Zaftra army Wanzer boarded the ship and it was impossible for them to stay at the dock any longer." I wondered why I had to defend Chan, but I spoke in a soothing tone. Then Darril suddenly sounded worried.

"That's right. So, were you able to safely repel the invading Wanzer? You're not saying that Chan or the crew were killed or anything, are you?"

"Fortunately, no one on the ship was injured," I added silently, though the Wanzer pilot committed suicide. Then Darril yelled again, his voice booming again.

"I see. Well then, tell that bastard Chang that next time we meet, we won't let him get away with it! And make sure he stays safe until we pay him back for leaving us behind!"

"Okay, I'll let him know," I replied with a bitter smile, meaning he wanted me to stay healthy until we meet again. It's a rather twisted way of saying it, but there are quite a lot of men who have been in the military for a long time, especially soldiers and non-commissioned officers, who talk like this. I know this because there are some in my family too.

"Well then, I will contact you again once I have gathered evidence at the Zaftra base. It will probably be in about two or three days."

"Please, be very careful," Darril said with such confidence, as if winning, surviving, and obtaining evidence was a fait accompli, that I couldn't help but express concern in my tone.

"Awaiting the next communication."

"Oh, don't worry," Darril replied with a chuckle.

"I'll come back without giving up, just to hear your charming French accent again. See you later," and with that the call was hung up.

"It doesn't feel like a trap. I can't imagine that a Zaftra military agent would be able to pull off something this sophisticated," Latona said with a serious face, listening to the conversation between me and Darril that was recorded on the handheld. Bosch responded with a frown.

"I mean, there's almost no chance that this was a plot by the Zaftra army, right?"

They probably don't know about Chang."

"It's a possibility that can't be ruled out. If Darril and the others are captured at Cumaná Port and forced to confess everything about who they were with and what they were doing there, then information about Chang will be leaked to the Zaftra army," Latona said casually, pointing out a rather frightening possibility.

"However, if a Zaftra spy was masquerading as Darril, he would have persistently questioned us about our identities. He would then claim to have a captured Wanzer in his possession and demand that we send someone to pick him up immediately. There's no reason for us to have such a roundabout plan, like launching a surprise attack on the base to get evidence."

"That's true," Zead nodded thoughtfully.

"Once suspicions begin to grow, there's no limit, but we can safely conclude that we've been able to contact Sergeant Darril of the USN military. Therefore, if he really does get evidence, we need to make arrangements to send a transport plane from Durandal HQ to Venezuela immediately."

"This will be a fairly unusual and dangerous mission, so we won't be able to select pilots according to rotation," Hermes groaned, scratching her head.

"I think it would be most reliable if we could ask Captain Robert. But he's probably on his way to the Aegean Sea to pick us up right now." And at that moment, all of the crew's mobile phones started to ring in talk mode.

" a....."

"It might be from Darril. Elsa, pick it up," Zead instructed, and I pressed the communication button.

" yes?"

"This is Robert. We have arrived at the specified airspace. We have been able to identify your ship using the Wanzer identification signal. At this size, it should have no trouble landing on the deck," Captain Robert's brisk voice came from the handheld communicator, and the atmosphere in the room relaxed with relief.

"This is Elsa. I'm really glad you could come. We'll get permission from the captain to land shortly, so please wait a moment," I replied, and a male voice other than Captain Robert suddenly came over from the handheld communicator.

"Elsa, I'm glad you were safe! Well, I had heard that everyone was safe, but it really was a shocking thought!"

" Back?" My eyes widened and I glanced down at the handheld communicator.

"Did you come all the way to the Aegean Sea too?"

"Oh my, what cold words, after I rushed over with everything I had! And besides, it's

pretty bad that you left me behind at HQ! Are you saying I'm not a member of Durandal?" Beck lamented in an over-the-top, theatrical tone. Feeling a bit overwhelmed, I responded rather coldly.

"I'll hear about that when we meet in person. For now, I need permission to land. So, I'll cut communication for now. That's all."

"Hey, hey, I know that's true, but..." Ignoring Beck's persistent insistence, I hung up the mobile phone. Then Latona smiled and lightly tapped me on the shoulder.

"That's pretty harsh. I came all the way from HQ to help you."

"Well, I guess it's nice, but just because Beck came doesn't mean I have any plans for him to do anything," I said, shrugging my shoulders. We then got permission to land from Chang, contacted the transport plane again, and had it land on the deck. Even though the plane was capable of vertical landing, it required considerable skill to land properly on the deck of a civilian ship that wasn't an aircraft carrier or anything like that, but Captain Robert was a skilled pilot and managed it without any trouble.

"Well, we'll be off now. Thank you for everything."

We said our goodbyes to Chang before boarding the Wanzer stored in the hold to travel to the transport plane.

"If we're destined to meet again, let's meet again"

"That's true. Well, it seems like you guys are involved in some dangerous work that involves national conflicts, so I don't think I'd go out of my way to stick my nose into your business. But if it's something that could lead to business, I'm always open to it."

After saying this, Chang, with an oddly serious look on his face, asked Zead,

"I haven't really looked into what position you guys hold until now. Perhaps you're allies of justice that span the globe?"

"No, I don't think so," Zead replied with a wry smile, shook hands with Chang, and boarded the Wanzer. Then, once we were all aboard the Wanzer and had finished moving from Chang's ship, Captain Robert immediately launched the transport.

"Honestly, even within EC territorial waters, we can't afford to take it easy. The EC Combined Navy has been urgently called into action on a quasi-war footing, and the military of each country is on edge, too, especially the navy and air force. If we were to land on a civilian ship and be seen boarding armed Wanzers, who knows what kind of punishment we'd get."

" Hmm, I guess so." Zead, who had gotten off the Wanzer and immediately moved to the transport plane's cockpit, frowned as he listened to Captain Robert's explanation.

"In any case, we need to get in touch with Deputy Secretary Allison. I'll be using your comm."

"Undersecretary Allison? I think Parliamentary Undersecretary Allison of the British State Department is with Prime Minister Noland at the EC headquarters in Paris, but do you think we can get in touch under these circumstances?" Captain Robert tilted his head suspiciously, apparently unaware of the special relationship between Zead and Undersecretary Allison, but Zead continued to operate the transport plane's communication equipment regardless. Glancing sideways at him, Hermes whispered.

"I see, so there is a secret code to directly interrupt the Vice Minister's portable communication device. That certainly means there is no way we can use the communication device on Chang's ship. It would be far too dangerous for both the sender and the receiver."

"Of course. Actually, communicating from a transport plane isn't particularly desirable, but it has no choice at this point. I trust that even if you know this secret code, you won't try to misuse it," Zead replied without turning around, operating the communication device, as if he had heard Hermes' dazzle. Hermes' expression was complicated, but before he could say anything, Zead finished operating it and dazzled.

"Now, if she's able to pick up her mobile phone, we should be able to connect."

"Zead? Are you okay?" Deputy Secretary Allison's tense voice came over the radio. Zed responded in a calm tone.

"I and all the other members are safe. We are currently in the airspace above Greece in a transport plane that was called from HQ. Are you in a position to have a lengthy conversation at the moment?"

"It's okay. How was the result of the illegal investigation?" the Undersecretary asked, clearly relieved. Zead answered matter-of-factly.

"When we went to Bassau, we found that the pipeline station, which was supposed to be decommissioned, was being heavily guarded by the Blauer Nebel and was ready for immediate use. In fact, we used a pipeline vehicle to enter Zaftra, but the Zaftra army blew up the pipeline and forcibly blocked our entry. Operational data had been wiped, and we were unable to confirm that the forces that attacked the German military base and the new resource zone in Poland were Zaftra army that had invaded and retreated via the pipeline, but the situation makes it almost certain. In other words, since the pipeline that was the intrusion route had been blown up, there is no risk of a mysterious Wanzer unit suddenly appearing inside the EC for

the time being."

"I suppose that should be considered good news, given that the USN fleet's invasion of Madeira seems inevitable," Deputy Secretary Allison replied with a sigh.

"If it was Zaftra that sent the Wanzer unit, does that mean that the USN and Zaftra had a secret agreement to attack the EC? If so, the EC has no hope of winning. The best they can do is to go crying to the OCU and beg for reinforcements."

"No, it appears that this is not the case. By pure coincidence, while we were escaping from Zaftra, we discovered that the Zaftra military had sent an undercover team into the USN state of Venezuela and was inciting an independence struggle. If all goes well, we may have concrete evidence within the next few days." Deputy Secretary Allison clearly held her breath as Zead said this.

"What? So, the real target of ZAFTRA is Venezuela, and the reason they attacked and disrupted the EC was to divert the attention of the USN?"

"That's highly likely. Frederick Lancaster had also speculated in that way, and I heard that the USN Atlantic Fleet heading for Madeira was originally meant to be sent to Venezuela as reinforcements. It seems that the EC has been used as a decoy," Zead said in a calm, bitter tone. Allison was speechless for a moment, but then responded in a voice that sounded like it was being forced out.

"That's an extremely infuriating situation, but there may be a better way to deal with it than the USN and ZAFTRA secretly conspiring to attack the EC. No matter how much the USN cares about Madeira, if they notice that Venezuela is on fire, they'll have no choice but to prioritize that."

"That's true. However, if we wait until the USN realizes their mistake, the situation will become more chaotic and Zaftra, who hatched the conspiracy, will reap the benefits. Ideally, I would like the situation to develop in such a way that the USN fleet is forced to hastily return to their home country before attacking Madeira," said Zead, and Deputy Secretary Allison responded in a somewhat calmer voice.

"The EC combined fleet is gathering at the Iberia Megafloat to hold back the USN fleet. If the USN fleet goes ahead with a landing on Madeira, the plan is to target that spot and intercept them with missiles, aircraft, and submarines. If it turns into a full-scale naval battle, our chances of winning are slim, but the EC Navy seems to be planning on using the Megafloat to replenish our supplies and draw the enemy into a war of attrition, which will buy us a lot of time."

"Well, if we can buy time as planned, we may be able to defend Madeira until the USN side realizes that the situation in Venezuela is worsening. However, there is a possibility that the USN fleet will launch a strong offensive, not wanting to withdraw

after being beaten down. Besides, missile attacks aside, a fleet attack by aircraft or submarines would not leave the attacking side unscathed. Even if supplies could be replenished with megafloats, would the EC combined fleet, which is a ragtag bunch, be able to withstand the loss of personnel? Well, there's no point in me worrying about the navy's operations," Zead said with a wry smile, when suddenly Hermes muttered. New Continent

"It might only buy you some time, but if that's okay, I can take down the computer systems of the USN fleet and put them in a state where they can't fight. I've actually managed to break through the security system used by the USN military without anyone noticing."

"Huh?" Not only Zead, but everyone in the cockpit all turned to look at Hermes with wide eyes. Then Hermes continued in a very unwilling tone.

"However, if the USN fleet is in combat mode, we won't be able to do anything. If we are to do it, it should be before the war breaks out. If we are allowed to use the Iberia Megafloat's communications equipment, I think we can launch an attack from a considerable distance."

"I see. It is possible to render them unable to fight, but it is morally and physically impossible for the EC to take advantage of that and launch a battle. So it only serves to buy us some time," Bosch nodded, quickly understanding the situation. Hermes then nodded back, not seeming amused.

"Exactly. So, if I can be selfish, I would like to communicate with Commander Maddox while the USN fleet is unable to fight. There's no point in talking to him if he's a combat idiot, but if Maddox is cunning and sees that the winds are turning against him, he might withdraw his fleet quickly. This is just wishful thinking, though."

"...Cecil. Did you hear Hermes' proposal?" Zead asked into the comm, and the voice of Deputy Director Allison immediately came back.

"I heard that. If you can do it, I would be very grateful. It's an incredibly attractive proposal. However, I can't make this decision on my own, so may I speak to the Prime Minister about it?"

"Yes, go ahead and tell us. Is that okay, Hermes?" Zead pressed, and Hermes nodded firmly, albeit with a frown.

"That's fine. I mean, if it wasn't fine, I wouldn't have said this in the first place."

"Well, I'll talk to the Prime Minister as soon as possible. Once we've reached a decision, I'll contact you right away. With that, I'll hang up for now," said Deputy Secretary Allison as she hung up the phone. Then, silence fell on the cockpit for a

while. It was Hermes who broke the silence.

"Robert, did the equipment I ordered from the factory arrive in time?"

"Yes, it's been loaded into the hangar. It's not set up yet," Captain Robert replied, and Hermes nodded sternly.

"I'll do the setup. I'm sure we can get the work done by the time we get to HQ or the Iberia Megafloat. The problem is, if I set up the guidance device on my Wanzer, I won't be able to put in a high-performance sensor, but if we can get support from the sky, we shouldn't really need a high-performance sensor."

"No, you can't just assume that. You never know what's going to happen on the battlefield. I'll take care of either the guidance device or the advanced detection device, or one of them," Beck suddenly spoke up from the side, and this time Hermes looked stunned.

"You? Are you planning on heading out onto the battlefield in a Wanzer?"

"Hey, hey, I can't help it if Leader, Latona, Bosch, or Elsa say that, but I don't want to hear it from you. It's true that with my skills, if I were to go out into the middle of a hand-to-hand combat or gunfight, I might just end up being a hindrance. But as long as I'm carrying a guidance device and advanced detection device and stay in the rear, it shouldn't be much of a problem," Beck said, puffing out his chest.

"Besides, I was so frustrated at being left behind that I trained hard and came up with my own fighting methods. I won't let anyone call me useless again."

"Special training? Your own fighting methods?" Hermes asked, looking increasingly exasperated.

"What kind of strategy is that?"

"You'll be amazed to hear that. It's a long-range missile tactic," Beck replied proudly, causing not only Hermes but everyone else in the room to look stunned. Then, as if speaking on behalf of everyone, Latona asked,

"Long-range missiles? Of all people, are you planning on imitating Zead?"

"Leader can fight and shoot if he wants to, but I can't, and I have no intention of doing so," Beck replied in a more confident manner.

"The targeting of the Wanzer's missiles is automatic, so as long as I keep a certain distance from the enemy, even I can hit my target with certainty. And all you need to keep a certain distance from the enemy is fast legs. Contrary to popular belief, missile-equipped robots need to be fast legs. So I used a hybrid Wanzer – a Wild Goat that our leader had left behind, fitted with Zenith legs – to train hard on my running."

"...Hmm, for now, it seems like the logic is sound," Bosch groaned, tilting his head.

"So, did the training pay off?"

"Oh, sure," Beck replies, sounding prouder now.

"At first, I felt like I was going to fall over every time I took a step, but I soon got used to it and was able to ride around without any problems, just like on a normal Wanzer. After all, even though I look like this, I'm a former professional soccer player, so keeping my balance and riding around easily is a piece of cake for me."

"I think driving a Wanzer and driving it yourself are quite different things. But, anyway, if you can actually drive a hybrid Wanzer, I have to admit that it's quite an impressive feat." Latona looked at Beck with a very suspicious look on her face.

"But the Wild Goat couldn't have been equipped with any decent missiles thanks to the Zenith's legs, right? That's why Zead left them behind."

"Don't worry, once you get the hang of it, you can switch to different hybrid combinations and still get by. Besides, it's a bit risky for me to put the hybrids together myself, but with Hermes adjusting it, I think it should be fine no matter what combination we use," Beck replied, this time as optimistic as possible.

"So, Professor Hermes, could you please prepare a missile-equipped hybrid Wanzer equipped with either a guidance system or a high-performance sensor, and prepare it specially for me?"

"Who's the teacher? Who's the teacher?" Hermes groaned in annoyance, but nodded.

"Well, it can't be helped. If I refuse to let them adjust the new Wanzer, it'll just be a clunker like a Wild Goat with Zenith legs attached, and it'll just trudge onto the battlefield. I'll leave the high-performance sensor on my Wanzer and adjust the hybrid Wanzer equipped with a guidance system and missiles."

"Oh, that's it!" Beck replied with a triumphant look on her face, when Latona interjected from the side.

"So, even if that's the configuration of Beck's equipment, what exactly are you talking about here, this guidance system?"

"Ah, I didn't tell Latona. I developed a system that would allow transport planes to perform high-altitude bombing missions, guided by Wanzers on the ground. I had completed the design before going to Bassau, but I didn't have time to actually assemble the equipment. So I asked the factory at HQ to assemble it while I was away," Hermes replied calmly. Latona then frowned and asked,

"So, you're planning to suddenly deploy a system that you've never actually used before in combat, are you?"

"Yeah, if necessary. Of course, if there's no need for that, we'll just take it back to HQ and test it out," Hermes said, shrugging.

"By the way, we've run computer simulations many times and confirmed that it works without any problems. Even the new link system specially made for Durandal, which is now our trump card, was only simulated before being deployed in combat in Poland, so I think it's the same thing."

"That may be true, but to be honest I'm a bit worried. After all, Beck is the guide, right? If we accidentally drop a bomb on our allies, it'll be no joke," Latona groaned, and Hermes scratched her head.

"There are safety devices built in to prevent the bombing of friendly forces. Besides, the possibility of misguiding the missile is not reduced just because we tested it, is it?" Own goal

"It's okay, there's nothing to worry about! Even though I may look like this, I've never scored a suicide run! I can always tell the difference between friend and foe!"

Latona looked at Beck, who was arrogantly saying this was not a guarantee at all, and let out a deep sigh.

"After all, it was the right decision to leave him behind. Even if he was a valuable asset, the thought of wandering around enemy territory with such a rowdy guy is enough to make me shudder."

"Well, if Beck is with me, I might not feel depressed," I added silently, though I might get annoyed. Then, the radio emitted a high-pitched receiving sound, and Zead responded by pressing the receiving button.

"This is Durandal."

"Allison. After speaking with the Prime Minister, we have decided that you will be temporarily dispatched to the Iberia Megafloat as a supply unit attached to the British Army. I will send you the unit code and other necessary information separately," Deputy Minister Allison announced in a brisk tone.

"Of course, arbitrarily incorporating members of Durandal, an EC organization, into the British military is clearly illegal, and even in light of British domestic law, it would be a major overstep of the Prime Minister's authority. But the Prime Minister has made a decision, and will take full responsibility if any problems arise."

"...I see." For an instant, Zead looked taken aback, and then he asked in a low voice.

"I thought that at best they would turn a blind eye and tell me to do my best, but this is a pretty bold decision. Has Prime Minister Noland had a change of heart?"

"The Prime Minister seems to be regretting his actions. The attack on the German base was a complete surprise, but the attack on the new resource area in Poland was predicted by Durandal. If he had believed in that prediction and mobilized only the military forces within his authority, he would not have found himself in such a

quagmire," the Vice Minister said, sighing softly.

"It's true that unless the Eurotunnel was breached, there would have been no chance of the Wanzer troops that attacked Germany attacking the British mainland. Sending British troops to Poland would have been possible with a little political effort. If nothing had been done, I would have been able to give up, but the fact that there was something that could have been done and it wasn't done seems to be a great regret for the Prime Minister."

"I see," Zead nodded, his expression firm.

"I understand very well how the Prime Minister feels. Whatever the outcome, we will do our best to ensure that he has no regrets. Please convey that we are grateful for his kindness."

"I'll let them know. Now, I'll send you the data, so please be prepared to receive it," Deputy Director Allison added after a brief pause.

"I wish you all the best. That's all."

"The British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron, huh? I guess they'll also be carrying out communications missions. At the British-administered EC military base in Gibraltar, they'll be able to modify the markings on the transport aircraft, the paintwork on the Wanzers, and the identification signal displays to British military specifications, and they'll also be able to refuel them," Zead said, looking at the data sent by Undersecretary Allison and giving a wry smile.

"The Iberia Megafloat will be bustling with preparations for the gathering of the combined fleet. There's a good chance that a special supply team from each country's military, like the one we're disguised as, has arrived. We'll probably be able to slip in without causing too much of a fuss, and we should be able to use the communications facilities as well."

"The problem is what happens after that," Latona groaned, frowning.

"If the USN fleet were suddenly rendered unable to fight, I think it would cause uproar not only on the USN side, but also on the EC side. Then, there would probably be people who would say, this is the perfect opportunity to unilaterally declare war and attack. How do we stop that?"

"That's true. If we can manipulate the information well, we might be able to hide the fact that the USN fleet had failed," Zead said, shaking his head.

"Well, we'll have to leave that to Hermes. If it comes to information warfare or electronic warfare, there's not much we can do."

"Depending on the situation, Hermes may be able to take down the EC's systems as well, rendering both sides unable to fight. At the very least, the Iberia Megafloat's

systems should be much easier to conquer than the USN fleet," Bosch said in a nonchalant tone, and both Zead and Latona grimaced.

"I don't want to make the fact that Durandal's Father 2 is a dangerous person public, but I don't think we can be too picky."

"That's true. Well, taking down the systems of the USN fleet would surely be enough to make us notorious all over the world. That's probably why Hermes looked so reluctant," said Latona, shaking her head. But Hermes herself was not present, busy adjusting Beck's plane and setting up the bombing guidance system. And then, at that moment... The portable communicators of Zead, Latona, Bosch, and myself all simultaneously rang out to receive calls.

"Darril?" Before I could even think about it, I had pressed the answer button.

"yes?"

"Elsa? It's Darril. We've succeeded in taking over the Zaftra base, and I've brought back a pile of evidence," Darril announced with a proud voice. I couldn't help but cheer up as well.

"Amazing! Did you capture a Wanzer as well?"

"No... The Wanzers either self-destructed or escaped, so we couldn't capture them. We couldn't take any prisoners either, " Darril explained, lowering his voice a little.

"However, we managed to prevent the explosion of what appeared to be the control room and secure it, and were able to obtain a considerable number of data disks. Most of the data was in the Zaftra language, which we couldn't read very well, but I think if you examine it there you will be able to find evidence."

"Yes, thank you, that's a great help," I replied, feeling a little disappointed inside. A data disk with an unknown content can be a big hit or miss when it comes to information. Of course, it could contain some very secret information, but it's also possible that it contains absolutely no useful information at all. However, Darril's next words made me lean forward without thinking.

"There was one data displaying something like a map, which was in the computer in the control room when we entered. It seems to be a flight record between Venezuela, Zaftra, and Africa or Europe. Should we just send this over the communication line?"

"Yes, I'd love that," I replied enthusiastically. But then I suddenly realized and made the suggestion that Darril was probably waiting for more than anything.

"Well, after this communication, I will prepare to receive the data. But before that, could you please tell me when and where I should send a transport plane to pick you up?"

"All right, that's it!" As expected, Darril cheered and specified the date and location.

The date and time was eight days from now, 9pm local time. The location was the cargo airport attached to the port of Cumaná. After confirming it again, Darril asked with a slightly anxious tone.

"By the way, after you pick us up, will that plane take us wherever we want?"

"Well, as long as we're not in a place where we'll be immediately intercepted by missiles if we invade, I don't think there'll be any problems. However, we'll need to get fuel, so it would be helpful if you told us in advance roughly where we need to go." Darril thought for a moment in response to my answer, and then answered.

"Southern France. Marseille or Nice or somewhere around there. I'll think about what to do from there. But for now, if I can get dropped off around there, that should be okay, right?"

"Yes, there's no problem," I replied, feeling relieved inside the New Continent. I thought it was unlikely that Darril and the others would ask to be sent to the USN or the Zaftra region, but if they asked to go to Sydney, Tokyo, or Singapore in the OCU, or Hong Kong or Cape Town that are not part of the National Bloc, we would have to worry about refueling and would have to get permission to enter from the government of that country first. However, if the destination was France, such concerns would be minimal, although not nonexistent. Then Darril spoke in a tone that seemed to foresee my relief.

"Don't worry. I have a lot of friends, and I know people all over the world. So, if you can just drop me off at a convenient place, I'll take care of everything from there."

"Okay. I'll definitely get you to the south of France. But first, make sure you don't miss your train in Cumaná," I told him, and Darril laughed.

"Oh, I'll be careful. By the way, Elsa, are you single?"

"Yeah, that's right. So what?" I asked, a little taken aback. Darril cleared his throat.

"No, nothing. Now, I'm going to send you what appears to be a flight record of the Zaftra military. Please prepare to receive it. That's all."

"Hmm, this is some strange data," Hermes said as she emerged from the bunk and entered the cockpit. She checked the data Darril had sent and tilted her head suspiciously. Beck's aircraft had already been adjusted and the bombing guidance system was set up, and while work was being done at the Gibraltar base, such as changing the paint job and refueling, she had been resting in the bunk, so at least from the outside, she looked as healthy as usual.

"Certainly, the data looks like a flight record, but there's no way that Zaftra military aircraft would actually fly on the route from Venezuela to the Madeira Islands or the route to France, right?"

"I can't say it won't happen, but unless it's an extremely cleverly disguised weapon, it will likely be caught in the air defense network and you'll be caught out," Zead replied, frowning.

"Perhaps it's not an actual flight record, but simulation data of a simulated flight?"

"That's a possibility, but then what kind of situation where they assuming when they conducted this simulation?" Bosch asked in a calm tone as Hermes kept tilting her head to the side.

"The mystery only deepens, but that's beside the point. Even if we objectively analyze this data, is it possible to determine that it was used by the Zaftra military?"

"Yes, the format of the records and the standard units of measurement all match those used by the Zaftra military. The notes are all in the Zaftra language as well, so if you just look at it, I'm sure this is official data used by the Zaftra military," Hermes said, shrugging.

"However, if someone who knows the Zaftra military well suspects that it may have been a plausible forgery, it will be difficult to dispel the suspicion."

"I see," Bosch nodded in understanding. Then, Captain Robert spoke in a tense voice.

"Hey! I see smoke on the horizon. Is that the Iberia Megafloat?"

"What?" While everyone looked nervously towards the horizon, Zead immediately went for the comm.

"This is the British Army 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron. Iberia Megafloat, respond... This is the British Army 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron. Iberia Megafloat, respond... This is the British Army 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron. Iberia Megafloat, respond... No response."

"Wow, that's amazing! Could it be a surprise attack by the USN military? Maybe they launched a sudden, no-questions-asked airstrike with long-range cruise missiles or stealth attack aircraft or something?" Beck shouted, and Bosch shook his head.

"No, it would take a lot of effort to destroy the communications functions of a base the size of the Iberia Megafloat with a missile attack or air strike from outside.

Cruise missiles would naturally be intercepted. However, if we launch an attack from the inside, it would be enough to blow up the communications room.

Alternatively, if we knew the frequency the base uses, we could even jam communications beforehand," Bosch said, glaring at the bitter tone of his voice.

"If it were to be set from within the base, then rebellion or terrorism would be conceivable, but in this case, the most likely scenario would be sabotage by undercover agents. If Durandal could be disguised as a special combat supply unit

at the sole discretion of the British Prime Minister, then it wouldn't be that difficult for a spy from a certain country, backed by the Prime Minister of a certain country, to disguise himself in the same way and infiltrate the Iberia Megafloat."

"...So, does that mean it was Blauer Nebel's doing?" Bosch shrugged, looking at Latona who groaned.

"I can't say for sure, but I have a feeling that this is probably the case. Either way, if you go to the site, you'll find out for sure."

"That's right," Latona nodded, and turned her gaze forward. The black smoke spewing out from the Iberia Megafloat, the EC's defense base in the Atlantic Ocean, was growing larger and more intense with each passing moment.

"There are two, no, three Wanzers on the flight deck. If we land, we'll definitely be targeted," Captain Robert growled, frowning, and Zead immediately nodded.

"We have no choice but to make an airborne landing, no matter how difficult. Fortunately, there is smoke coming out of everywhere, which makes anti-aircraft visibility very poor. We will do our best to avoid attacks from above deck, and I would appreciate it if you could assist with the airborne landing."

"Yeah, I'll figure something out." The captain nodded, still frowning. Then Zead turned his attention to Beck.

"What do you think? Do you think you can make an airborne drop with a missile-equipped hybrid Wanzer? If you're not sure, you can stay on the transport. Don't push yourself too hard."

"You've got to be kidding me, Leader. If the guide plane doesn't land, we won't be able to use our bombing equipment," Beck said, grinning.

"Well, I may not be able to make a graceful airborne landing like you guys, but I think I can probably make a landing that doesn't destroy the aircraft. At least in the simulation, I was able to make it look good."

"I see. In that case, I'll leave it to you," said Zead, looking around at us.

"Everyone, board your Wanzers and prepare for airborne drop!"

"Yay!" Beck yelled cheerfully and took off running. Maybe at this rate, his first airborne landing will go smoothly, I thought, as I shrugged and ran to the hangar.

"Countdown, five, four, three, two, one, descend! As always, Latona will take the lead and I will follow her. No matter how huge the Iberia Megafloat is, it is still a structure on the sea, not on land, and the flight deck, which will be the target of our airborne landing, is located quite close to the outer edge. One wrong move and we could seriously end up diving into the sea. And, with the exception of a few very special large aircraft, most Wanzers will be scrapped if they fall into the sea.

"Countdown, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, descend!" I flew the Wanzer into the air, while black smoke billowed out from all sides, blocking my view. They seemed to be firing from below, but the line of fire was completely off target. I landed on the sturdy deck with a heavy bang, and instead of firing immediately, I looked around to see what was going on around me. The black smoke was not only thick in the sky, but also near the deck, making visibility very poor. There were destroyed and burning planes and facilities everywhere, so the heat source sensors were disrupted and unreliable. The sound sensors were also not working properly, as the sounds of fire and gusts of wind were ringing out loud, and there was the roar of an airplane in the sky, and there were irregular echoes, making it difficult to tell what was going on.

"But the conditions are the same for both sides. If there's one difference... it's coming!" The computer detects the attack of the Latona and automatically fires its shotgun. If you leave it to the link attack, you can accurately shoot at enemy aircraft without the risk of friendly fire, no matter how poor the visibility is. Then, from the other side, a Wanzer appeared, as if seeping out of the smoke. The identification signal indicated that it belonged to the German Army's supply unit, but this heavy form looked familiar. It was a Schnecke Egel type, used by the Blauer Nebel as its main force. Even if the German army loved Schnecke's Wanzers, there was no way that such a high-performance and expensive Wanzer would be assigned to a supply unit. Before I had time to think about it, the Egel type Wanzer fired its machine gun without any hesitation. However, of course, we were also fully alert, and the torso and legs of the Wanzer I was currently riding on were tattooed, with no other aircraft being able to match its agility. I immediately dodged and counterattacked with my machine gun. My attacks hit their targets perfectly, but the enemy plane's armor was so thick that a single barrage of dodged shots didn't do much damage. But I didn't intend to be satisfied with just one attack. With force that seemed to cut through the smoke, Latona's plane leapt out from the side and slammed a pile bunker into the fuselage of the Egel-type Wanzer. At the same time, I fired my shotgun and machine gun simultaneously. No matter how thick the armor, it would be unbearable to take so many consecutive hits at once. The Egel-type Wanzer spewed black smoke from its entire body and stalled, and the pilot was ejected along with the cockpit. Then Latona cried out sharply.

"Elsa, don't let the ejected pilot escape! In this chaotic situation, if he escapes into the base and his location becomes unknown, even a single living human being will be enough to pose a threat!"

"Roger!" I drove the Wanzer and aimed the machine gun at the ejected cockpit. The

pilot came out of the cockpit and froze when he saw the muzzle.

"If you run away, we'll shoot you. As you attack an EC base while serving in the German military, you will be considered spies or terrorists," I heard this announcement over the external loudspeaker. I remembered that I had been treated in a similar way not long ago by none other than the commander of the Blauer Nebel, and felt some mixed emotions inside, but now was not the time for that. Then, from the black smoke that seemed to have gotten even thicker, Latona stepped out, carrying the ejected cockpit. Then, with a somewhat rough thud, it was lowered next to the cockpit I was aiming at.

"As we descended, we engaged with an enemy plane equipped with an armor-piercing cannon and destroyed its weapon, but we didn't finish it off. Anyway, we've finished it off."

"Thank you for your hard work." I nodded in understanding, realizing that the attack by the Latona aircraft to which my aircraft first responded was aimed at an enemy equipped with an armor-piercing cannon.

"I believe Captain Robert said there were three Wanzers on the flight deck, but does that mean there is another one?"

"There's at least one more. There may be more coming out from inside. But with this smoke, it's impossible to tell what's going on," Latona replied, sounding a bit annoyed.

"After all, every time we destroy a Wanzer, a lot of smoke is added. Well, it's probably the same for the enemy, who can't grasp the situation."

"Hello, sorry to keep you waiting," a nonchalant voice said as a Bosch machine emerged from the smoke.

"But there's a lot of smoke. I think we'll be able to get a better grasp of the situation if the Hermes plane, equipped with advanced sensors, can land."

"Hermes? I really hope she doesn't trip and fall into the sea," Latona replied in an unreserved tone.

"Well, with the Iberia Megafloat in this state, the operation starring Yakko-san will likely be postponed for a while at least. Still, there's no doubt that she's an important trump card. If push comes to shove, we'll have to protect her even at the risk of our own lives."

"That's right. Once we can meet up, I'll act as his bodyguard. Latona and Elsa will go ahead, and if Beck can stay close to Zead, that'll be a great success," said Bosch, pointing its sensors towards the two cockpits.

"Are those the pilots of the destroyed Wanzer?"

"That's right. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, our enemy this time doesn't seem to be a suicide Wanzler or a suicide pilot. They're probably not from Zaftra, but German. Or maybe a Zaftra spy," Latona said in a brusque tone, as if trying to suppress her inner thoughts.

"If he escapes and sneaks into the base, it will cause a lot of trouble, but if we can secure him until this is all over, he will become a valuable witness to finding out the truth. Either way, you need to be careful when handling him."

"That's certainly true. In that case, Hermes and I will be in charge of prisoner management," Bosch said, calling out through the external loudspeaker to the pilot whom I was pointing the machine gun at.

"You know, if you stand in this fire with your bare hands, the smoke will damage your eyes and throat. Why don't you go back into the cockpit?" The pilot started yelling something, but in this situation, it was impossible to hear a living human voice, even if you were very close. Bosch continued calling out.

"Sorry. It's too noisy around here, so I can't hear you. I'll listen to you when the commotion calms down, so if you could just stay quiet in the cockpit until then, that would be a great help. If you still try to come out of the cockpit, we'll take that as an attempt to escape and we'll shoot you to death." As soon as he said that, the Bosch's machine gun was pointed directly at the pilot. And he made a point of speaking German.

"If you resist, I'll kill you. If you stay still, I won't kill you." At that, the pilot ran back to the cockpit and slammed the hatch shut. Then Bosch announced in a very satisfied voice.

"Okay, good boy."

"I see. That way, I don't have to get into firing position unless the cockpit hatch opens, so that's convenient," Latona exclaimed in admiration, and Bosch responded with a wry smile.

"Yeah. And besides, even if you tell people to come out, it's not easy for them to do so, but if they're told to stay inside, they tend to obey and stay put. Plus, it also greatly reduces the chances of prisoners getting caught in an explosion or something."

"I see. In this case, it happened that it didn't come out, so I didn't give it a chance and brought the whole cockpit with me," Latona said, pointing the sensor towards the cockpit she had brought with her.

"From now on, when we take prisoners, even if they are outside, we will bring them back to the cockpit before bringing them back."

"Yes, that sounds good," Bosch had responded in his usual nonchalant manner up until that point, but then he suddenly changed his tone and spoke in a dazzling voice, as if talking to himself.

"But now Blauer Nebel has finally committed sabotage by directly attacking an EC military facility. With this, the German military has completely gone from being a victim to being a suspect."

"That's right, don't be depressed. The accomplice, or rather the mastermind, the mastermind behind the conspiracy is undoubtedly my home country, Zaftra," Latona said in a blunt but sincere tone in her own way.

"There's no point in lamenting how things have come to this. We should at least try to do something to restore even a little of our country's honor."

"Yes, that's right," Bosch replied, his tone returning to a calm tone. Suddenly, to his left, there was a loud explosion.

"What?" Bazooka

"Was it a missile, a grenade launcher, or something? Did an explosive ignite?" Bosch had barely finished speaking when another explosion occurred to his right.

"Hmm. It seems that they're just firing explosive shells blindly into the smoke without any aim. Wagner would never resort to such a careless tactic, but it seems the person in command here is someone else."

"Now that I think about it, Blauer Nebel had a mean and violent red-haired boy who wouldn't hesitate to fire his explosive shell cannon even if it involved his allies," Latona replied sarcastically.

"Hermes says it's the red-headed murderer Dranz. Well, whether Dranz is in charge or not, it doesn't really matter if it's not the vampire Wagner."

"That's right. Even if such wild shots come on a hit course by chance, as long as you're not too careless, you can easily dodge them," Bosch, the master of evasion, said as if it were a matter of course. Well, it's true that I don't have as much leeway as Bosch, but both Latona and I are piloting agile Tatou, and if we're careful enough, we should be able to dodge an explosive cannon that's firing without aiming from a long distance. And then, in the distance, there was the sound of another explosive cannon firing. If I paid attention, I could hear the sound of it firing, and from there I could predict the trajectory to some extent. It seemed closer than the first two shots, but it didn't seem to be on a course to hit my unit...

"What?" At that moment, I couldn't believe my eyes. The Bosch plane had been hit directly by the explosive shell cannon. Moreover, if I was not mistaken, it looked like the Bosch plane had deliberately gone out of its way to hit the target...?

"Wh-what are you doing, Bosch!" As I stood there, stunned, Latona yelled in a voice somewhere between a yell and a scream. Bosch responded with a wry smile.

"I'm fine, it's nothing serious. My right arm is injured, but I can still move it somehow."

"No, that's not it! Why didn't you dodge just now? In fact, it looked like you were moving in the direction of the hit, did you misread it?" Latona questioned in a tone of mixed indignation and confusion. Since she had made the same judgment, it seemed that I had not been mistaken in thinking that Bosch's machine was going to hit it. Bosch then replied in a troubled voice.

"No, I thought that if I left it alone the prisoners would be hit directly, so I jumped out. Thinking about it carefully, it might have been better to intercept them with machine gun fire as well."

"A direct hit on the prisoners?" Latona roared, completely taken by surprise. Now that she thought about it, the two escape cockpits where the prisoners were holed up were located right behind Bosch's plane. If Bosch's plane hadn't been there, one of the two, or maybe both, would have been blown away by a direct hit from the explosive cannon.

"...That bastard Dranz, he may not have done it on purpose, but I still can't forgive him," Latona growled, as another explosive shell cannon exploded in another location. The shell landed far enough away that there was no need to dodge, but somehow, it felt like the interval between shots was getting shorter. Perhaps, in addition to the Dranz machine, another machine equipped with an explosive shell cannon had joined the group, I thought.

"So, what should we do? I think we should push the prisoners as far back as possible," asked Bosch, and Latona immediately replied.

"That's right. Bosch, if you can move your arms, please grab the cockpit and step back as far as you can. Elsa and I will step forward."

"There's no problem with retreating, but it looks like the enemy is sending reinforcements from within the base. Is it okay for two planes to go forward?" Bosch asked in a concerned tone, holding the cockpit. But Latona answered firmly.

"If we don't move forward now, we'll be pushed to the edge of the flight deck and it will become even more difficult. With less room to maneuver, the Hebonobetsuki won't be able to descend. We need to move forward even if it means pushing ourselves a little, and secure space behind us."

"Okay. Be careful," Latona said, as she somehow managed to pick up the two cockpits of the Bosch machine, which also had damage to its legs, and stepped

back with a slightly unsteady gait. Then she called out to me.

"Let's go, Elsa. Let's move forward while being careful of the explosive cannon."

"Yes." We took careful steps forward. Meanwhile, several rounds of explosive shells were fired, but they all missed far.

"I wonder if that shot just now was just a fluke... Oops!" Suddenly, an explosive shell cannon was fired on a course that looked likely to hit my aircraft, and on guard, I immediately dodged it. Luckily, I managed to dodge it, but because I was moving forward and closing the distance, the time between the sound of the shot and the actual bullet was short. Then, from the thick smoke, two Eagle-type Wanzers suddenly appeared, as if out of nowhere. One was equipped with a machine gun and a shield, and the other was equipped with a melee weapon called a nutcracker and a shield.

"Here it comes, Natsu!" Without a moment's hesitation, the Latona machine pounces on the melee weapon-equipped machine, attempting to slam its pile bunker into it, but the enemy machine skillfully defends itself using its shield. At the same time, however, the link system activates and my machine fires a shotgun. My shot hits it squarely, and the arm equipped with the melee weapon explodes and is torn off. Meanwhile, the machine equipped with a machine gun keeps its distance and fires at the Latona machine, but the Latona machine defends itself with its shield. Seeing that the opposing melee weapon-equipped machine has lost its weapon, the Latona machine quickly switches opponents and closes the distance towards the machine gun machine. I also head towards the machine gun machine while firing diversionary shots. However, the melee weapon-equipped machine, which seemed powerless now, ferociously rams into my machine as it tries to slip past me.

"Uwah!" I narrowly avoided the ramming attack, but my balance was thrown off and I was unable to counterattack. At that moment, the enemy Wanzers rushed in again, trying to ram into me. Just as I managed to regain my balance, I quickly measured the distance and fired my machine gun and shotgun simultaneously.

"Go!" With a thunderous roar, the enemy Wanzers' shield and remaining arm exploded. Just when I thought I'd done it, my ship received a strong impact and fell over. While I was distracted by the enemy in front of me, I was hit directly by a long-range explosive cannon attack, whether it was intentional or just a fluke.

"Elsa!" Latona, who had singlehandedly destroyed the weaponized arm of the machine gun-equipped machine while I was hesitating, turned around and shouted. I responded while quickly righting the machine.

"It's okay, there is some damage, but nothing is inoperable!"

"I see! Then I'll finish them off, and you take the ejected cockpit and retreat! I'll take care of this!" Latona shouted, but of course, she couldn't follow her orders.

"No matter how good you are; you can't do it alone! If you hold on, I'll stay too! If you retreat, let's fall together!" I shouted back, but Latona was unusually hesitant and hesitant. She didn't think she could hold out on her own, but if she fell back, the enemy would push back. How long could we hold out while coordinating with my damaged unit? It was a very difficult situation to judge. However, the battle situation would not wait for our decision. More explosive shells were fired, and although they missed my unit or Latona's, they hit the enemy Wanzer, who had lost both arms. The Egel-type Wanzer, which had already sustained considerable damage to its fuselage, was unfortunately rendered inoperable by the friendly attack, and the pilot was ejected along with the cockpit. We were forced to make a new decision: should we take the cockpit as a prisoner or ignore it for the time being? Just as we were about to make a new decision, two more enemy Wanzers came charging in, pushing their way through the thick smoke. We had no choice but to fight back, and just as we were getting the Wanzer ready, a missile suddenly came flying out of the smoke, hitting the new enemy Wanzer with a heavy blow. The Latona immediately jumped in, stabbed the Pile Bunker, and easily destroyed one of them. I then stopped the other one with just machine gun fire.

"Zead?"

"I'm not the only leader, I'm here too!" Beck's cheerful voice answered Latona's question. Now that he thought about it, there were two missiles that had just come flying. Otherwise, there was no way they could have attacked two enemies at the same time.

"Beck? Did you get down safely?"

"Of course! Otherwise you wouldn't be here!" A hybrid Wanzer, consisting of the body of a Zelto, a high-output Wanzer made by the EC company Sender, and the legs of a Cicada II, a general-purpose, highly mobile Wanzer also made by Sender, came running towards them with a rather unsteady gait. Latona then scolded them in a stern tone.

"Don't rush forward recklessly! If you get too close to the enemy plane, you won't be able to fire your missiles!"

"Oh, I know! I completely understand that, but there are circumstances that require us to move forward a little more!" Saying this, Beck pointed to an unfamiliar device equipped on its back.

"This is a bombing guidance device specially made for Hermes. It seems the enemy is forming a tight formation, surrounding the explosive shell cannon-equipped aircraft. Let's bomb them and take them all out in one fell swoop!"

"Sorry for the delay. We had a hard time finding a place where Hermes and Beck could land safely, but we managed to get everyone down," Zead's calm voice came from the headset.

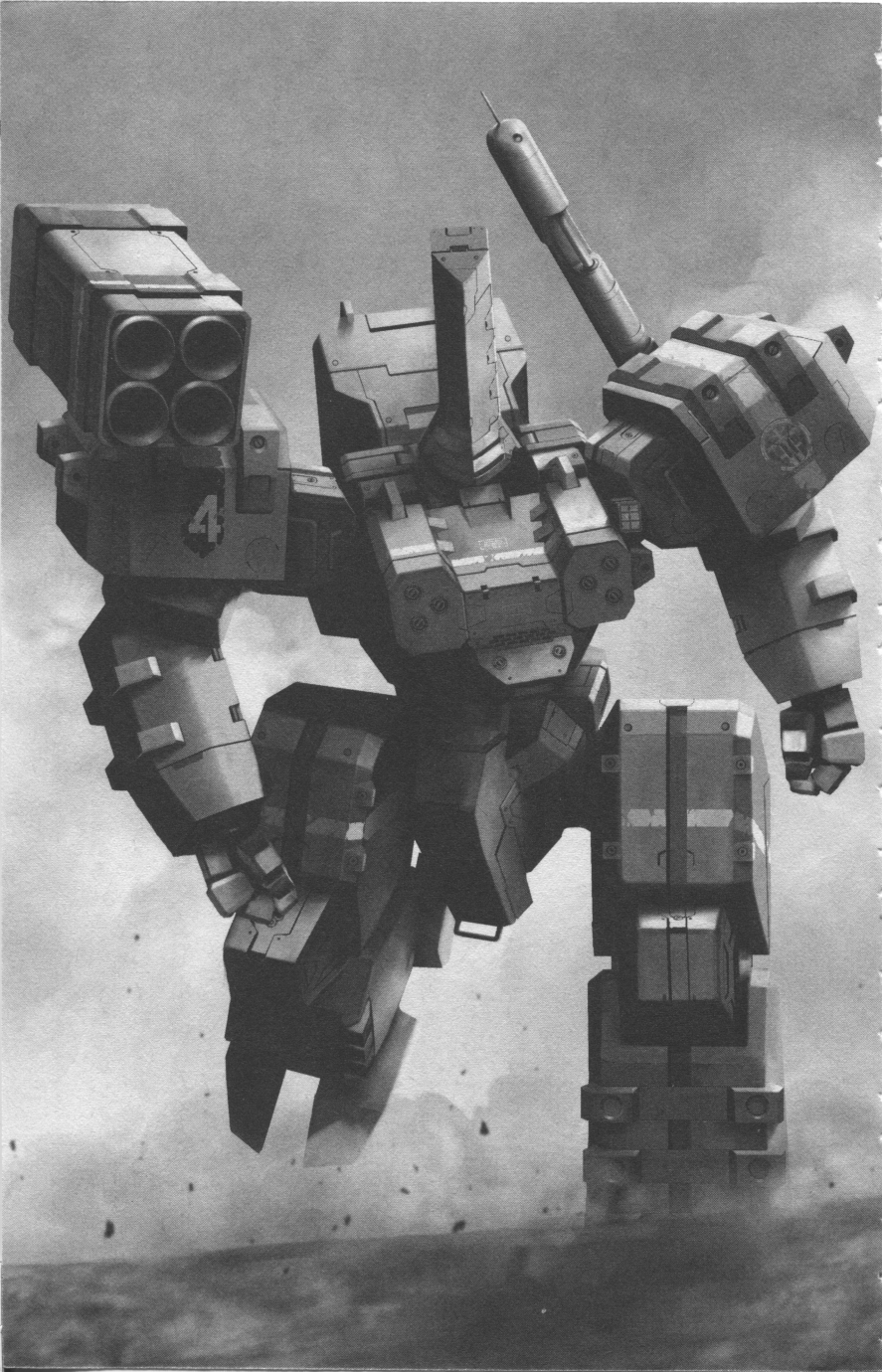
"The Hermes aircraft is equipped with advanced sensing devices that can roughly pinpoint the enemy's location, but to ensure that the bombing will hit its target, we need to send Beck's aircraft, which is equipped with a guidance system, forward to a certain extent. If the enemy advances, I will provide support with missiles, so you guys will cover Beck's aircraft as well."

"Understood. Then, I want you to send the Hermes over here so we can capture the escaped enemy pilot as a prisoner," Latona said as she attacked the last remaining enemy Wanzer. The machine gun and arm of the machine had been destroyed, leaving only the arm equipped with a shield, but the pilot of this machine did not seem to have the skill to ram the machine with the shield still attached, and the pile bunker was slammed into the fuselage, easily thwarting the attack. I then pointed the machine gun at the cockpit, which had been ejected and was lying on the ground, and used the external loudspeaker to warn them.

"Don't come out of the cockpit! If you do, I'll assume you're trying to flee and I'll shoot you on the spot!" I yelled in a shrill voice that wasn't acting, and without the slightest bit of composure, and the cockpit hatch, which had been opening timidly, closed in an instant. "Okay, that'll be fine," I thought, dazed, as I ran to the next cockpit to give a warning. After doing so, we gathered the three cockpits, still with their pilots inside, together, and Latona's machine brought over the cockpit of the Wanzer that had just been destroyed.

"That's it. Is there anything missing?"

"It shouldn't be." We exchanged a short conversation while keeping an eye out for any new enemy Wanzers charging in. For now, the explosive shell cannon attacks continued intermittently, but there was no sign of the Wanzers themselves advancing. The explosive shell cannon's fire also seemed hesitant, and it was firing in all the wrong directions. It seemed that the two units that had charged in earlier had been hit by missiles in an instant and destroyed, which had come as a bigger shock to the enemy than they had expected, and they were beginning to wonder what tactics they should use to respond. And of course, the enemy's hesitation was an opportunity for our allies. Beck's unit, which had been peering at the enemy



camp through the smoke, eventually extended a long antenna from the device on its back as if it was ready.

"Bombardment control, commence!" Beck announced in a dramatic voice, but nothing happened immediately. The actual time that passed was probably measured in seconds, maybe a minute at most, but after a strangely tense wait, a violent explosion suddenly roared up ahead.

"Yes! All the bullets hit their targets! The enemy has been annihilated!"

"It'll be troublesome if the escaped pilot gets away! We'll secure him and make him prisoner!" With that, Latona's plane took off, and I quickly followed suit.

please keep an eye on these four cockpits to make sure the pilots don't escape!"

"Even if you say you're keeping an eye on us, the only weapon my Wanzer has is missiles. So you're saying if the pilot escapes, I should shoot him with missiles?"

Beck asked in a flustered tone, to which Latona yelled.

"Nobody said you could use weapons against humans! Keep an eye on them, and if you think the hatch is about to open, just lightly hit the cockpit with your fist to scare them away! If it still tries to open, hold it down with your hand and break the hatch! Have you ever wondered why the Wanzer has arms and legs?"

"I-I got it! I got it!" Beck replied with a tired look on his face, but without paying any more attention to him, the Latona plane quickly advanced through the thick smoke. Then, suddenly, from the smoke, an explosive cannon was fired at the Latona plane with surprisingly accurate aim.

"What do you mean, annihilated?! We still have plenty of resistance left!" Latona narrowly dodged the attack and, roaring, charged forward, attacking the large Wanzer equipped with an explosive shell cannon that had appeared in front of her. The large Egel-type Wanzer, likely for the commander's use, swung the barrel of its explosive shell cannon like a club, trying to knock down the Latona machine that had closed in at close range, but its movements were extremely slow. Even if it hadn't completely thwarted it, it still seemed to have sustained considerable damage from the bombing.

"Too slow!" With a flash of determination, Latona's pile bunker pierced the right arm of the large Wanzer, and at the same time, my unit hit it with a linked attack of its shotgun. Another Wanzer, which seemed to be barely moving, came out with a machine gun at the ready, but I fired my machine gun first, and it was easily thwarted before it could do anything. Meanwhile, the large Wanzer, which had been hit by the coordinated attack, had its right arm blown off and dropped its explosive shell cannon, but it was not willing to give up and came charging at it with its left

arm. Latona's unit did not dare dodge this attack, but instead slammed its shield down from the front to block it. The left arm of the large Wanzer spewed black smoke, and just as it stopped moving, a well-aimed hit from the pile bunker pierced deep into the center of its fuselage. Even though the large Wanzer was an Egel-type Wanzer, known for the thickness and sturdiness of its armor, there was nothing it could do after being beaten this badly. Black smoke suddenly spewed out from the damaged area, and the pilot was ejected from the cockpit.

"Wanzer pilots, do not exit your cockpits! If you do, it will be assumed you are trying to flee and you will be shot immediately!" the Latona emitted a roar-like warning over its external loudspeaker. Meanwhile, I finished off the Wanzers that hadn't stalled with my machine gun, and picked up the cockpits that had been ejected and lying on the ground. After all, on the bombed-out flight deck, the remains of Wanzers were spewing out fierce black smoke all over the place, and if any living pilot were to carelessly step outside, he would be instantly engulfed in the smoke and suffocated. As far as I could see, there was not a single cockpit where the hatch had already been opened and the pilot had escaped.

"For now, it looks like we've managed to take control of the flight deck."

"Yes. But the Vampire Wagner must still be somewhere inside the base. There's no way he wouldn't be here," Latona said in a stern tone. Suddenly, the entire megafloat shook slightly, and a different kind of explosion than the sounds of explosions and combustion that had been heard up until then rang out. And in the next moment, over ten cruise missiles, trailing white smoke, were launched high into the air.

"Wh-what?"

"Could this be a suicide attack?" Latona blurted out a chilling phrase for a moment. Certainly, if Wagner had sensed the annihilation of the Dranz unit, he might have gone so far as to slam the megafloat-controlled missiles straight into the flight deck. However, fortunately, or perhaps not, the cruise missiles changed direction at high altitude and flew off towards their designated target, although we didn't know where. We were extremely curious as to what they were aiming for, but we no longer had any way of stopping the missiles once they had flown away.

"Wagner is probably in the cruise missile control center, but at the moment I have no idea where that is," he said, half talking to himself, Latona dazzling.

"We also need to secure the prisoners, so for now, it seems best not to rush from here until everyone has gathered."

"That's true..." To be honest, if we were to encounter Wagner in our current

condition, there's a good chance we'd be killed in return, I thought silently.

MISSION 11:

Madeira Island

"The first and second command rooms have been completely wiped out, and the base commander and all of his main staff have been killed in action. The third command room has barely managed to retain its personnel and facilities, but the majority of the supplies are unusable and the base's functions have been greatly reduced," Zead announced in a solemn tone.

"Meanwhile, it seems that the EC combined fleet has decided to cancel its assembly at the Iberia Megafloat, which is in a state of chaos, and will instead temporarily assemble in the port of Lisbon in Portugal. However, opinions are still divided among the generals of each country regarding the treatment of German military vessels, and no final decision has been made. If things continue as they are, it is becoming increasingly doubtful whether the EC fleets will be able to effectively unite and fight in the first place."

"Well, it is understandable if you like that kind of thing... but the EC has ended up facing an external enemy in the worst possible conditions," Bosch said, his tone brilliant and bitter.

"So where did the cruise missile go?"

"The Megafloat's radar system is destroyed, so we don't know anything more than that it flew off to the west. New York just announced that the USN Navy Atlantic Fleet had been attacked without warning by cruise missiles from the Iberia Megafloat. In response to this, the USN government officially declared war on the EC. In response, the EC parliament announced that the Iberia Megafloat had been temporarily occupied by an armed group believed to be rebels or terrorists, and that the attack on the USN fleet was carried out by this armed group, and was unrelated to the EC parliament or military, but there has been no response from the USN side so far," Zead said, and this time it was Hermes who let out a groan.

"Oh no. Finally, it's happened. No matter how many times you declare war after a surprise attack, who can trust you in this situation? It will only make people think that the mastermind behind the terrorist attack on EC that manipulated Blauer Nebel is not Zaftra, but the USN."

"So, where is the USN fleet heading after the declaration of war? Madeira? Or the Iberia Megafloat?" Latona asked quickly, and Zead shook his head.

"We don't know. At present, the EC has no way of detecting the New Continent interception, nor does it know where the USN fleet is or where it's heading. The USN fleet is equipped with satellite system concealment capabilities, and the Iberia Megafloat's wide-area radar has been completely destroyed and is unusable. All patrol planes have been destroyed, so they can't even conduct forced

reconnaissance. The only aircraft we can use are the armed resupply planes of the British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron."

"So that means we have no choice but to go scout it out?" Beck yelled, eyes wide, and Zead replied in a heavy tone.

"That may eventually come to pass. However, for now, we must be prepared to respond to any request for assistance from the Megafloat Security Force. Until we can confirm whether the remnants of Wagner and Blauer Nebel are still inside the Megafloat, dealing with them will take priority." New Continent, this way

"That's right. If the USN fleet attacks the Megafloat and Wagner hasn't been dealt with by then, it will be a big problem," Bosch groaned in a tone full of a sense of crisis. Currently, we are in a transport plane that has landed on the flight deck. After all, since we are still disguised as the British Army, all negotiations with the Megafloat side will be handled by Zead alone, and the others have decided to stay out of the public as much as possible. In fact, even if we search for Wagner and the others, it is not that easy to understand the complex structure of the huge Megafloat, and if we wander around carelessly, there is a risk of mutual attack with the Wanzers of the Megafloat security force. Bosch and my aircraft were quite badly damaged, and we needed time to repair them, so we decided that it would be best to wait until we were called. However, even if we knew that it was fine in theory, it would require a lot of patience to stay still and wait in this tense situation in many ways. Both Bosch's and my planes have already had their parts replaced and are completely repaired, so there is nothing that needs to be done for the time being. Then the communication device on the transport plane emitted a receiving tone. Zead immediately replied.

"This is the British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron."

"This is the third command room of the Iberia Megafloat. The security forces have reported that they have finished checking all areas of the base, but the Armed Wanzers unit that sabotaged the base and launched cruise missiles has nowhere to be found. We have also discovered that all of the submarines moored at the base's port have been destroyed except for the largest of them. The largest of the missing submarines is capable of carrying nearly ten Wanzers, so we believe the Armed Wanzers unit likely escaped using this submarine," a young voice announced in a slightly nervous tone.

"There is a possibility that spies remain, so the guards will remain on high alert. In particular, we will take measures to ensure that the prisoners handed over to us are not harmed in the slightest, but we believe that the support of your armed Wanzers

will likely not be necessary. Therefore, there is another mission we would like to ask of you as the Iberia Megafloat."

"What is it?" Zead asked simply, and the voice of a young man who seemed to be an officer on the Megafloat tried hard to explain, but in a somewhat roundabout way. Perhaps English was not his native language.

"Just now, cruise missiles were fired from our base at the USN Atlantic Fleet, and on that pretext, the USN has declared war on the EC. The USN fleet will likely launch an attack on either our base or Madeira. However, our base's radar system and patrol aircraft have been completely destroyed, and we are now in a state where we are completely unable to detect the USN fleet even if it approaches us. Therefore, please be aware that this is a dangerous mission, and that it is not something that should be asked of you, who belong to the British military. Could you please use your armed supply aircraft to scout whether the USN fleet is heading for our base or Madeira?"

"Understood. However, the aircraft we are using are not designed for patrol or reconnaissance, and are not equipped with the advanced sensing equipment required for such missions. I cannot guarantee that we will be able to meet your expectations, but given the circumstances, we will do everything we can," Zead replied in a sincere tone, and the officer on the megafloat let out a humble voice.

"Please, I look forward to working with you."

"So, where is the USN fleet heading, the Iberia Megafloat or Madeira?" Bosch asked to no one in particular, and Latona frowned in response.

"That's difficult. From a purely tactical standpoint, I think it would be best to attack the Iberia Megafloat, which is in a state of chaos. It's a military base, and it's also where they fired the cruise missiles that were the pretext for starting the war."

"Yes, from a purely tactical standpoint, you're right. Commander Maddox will probably attack Madeira without hesitation. That would be far more appealing to the USN government and its people," Hermes said bitterly.

"What's more, some mysterious civilian organization called the Madeira Free Independence Council is sending armed ships out on their own to accompany the USN fleet, right? At that point, I don't think the fleet commander's plans were already considering proper naval battles or capturing military bases."

"Well, at this point we don't know if the armed ships of the Madeira Free Independence Council are accompanying the Atlantic Fleet. They departed from different ports, and there is a considerable difference in their speed, so I think they are acting separately," Zead pointed out very calmly. Then Bosch continued in a

matter-of-fact tone.

"On the other hand, if there were civilian ships accompanying the USN fleet, they would probably make up a hoax, a false report or whatever, to claim that the civilian ships had been damaged by the Iberia Megafloat's cruise missiles. Wouldn't that be a much more effective way to stir up public opinion in the USN in favor of war against the EC?"

"...That's true," Hermes nodded, still frowning.

"Even if Commander Maddox is a military man who values political appeal, he still wouldn't be so crazy as to have a civilian ship accompany a fleet that has entered a state of combat. It's true, if civilian ships were accompanying the fleet, there would be no need to keep the fleet's operations secret. But then, would that mean they could attack a military base instead?"

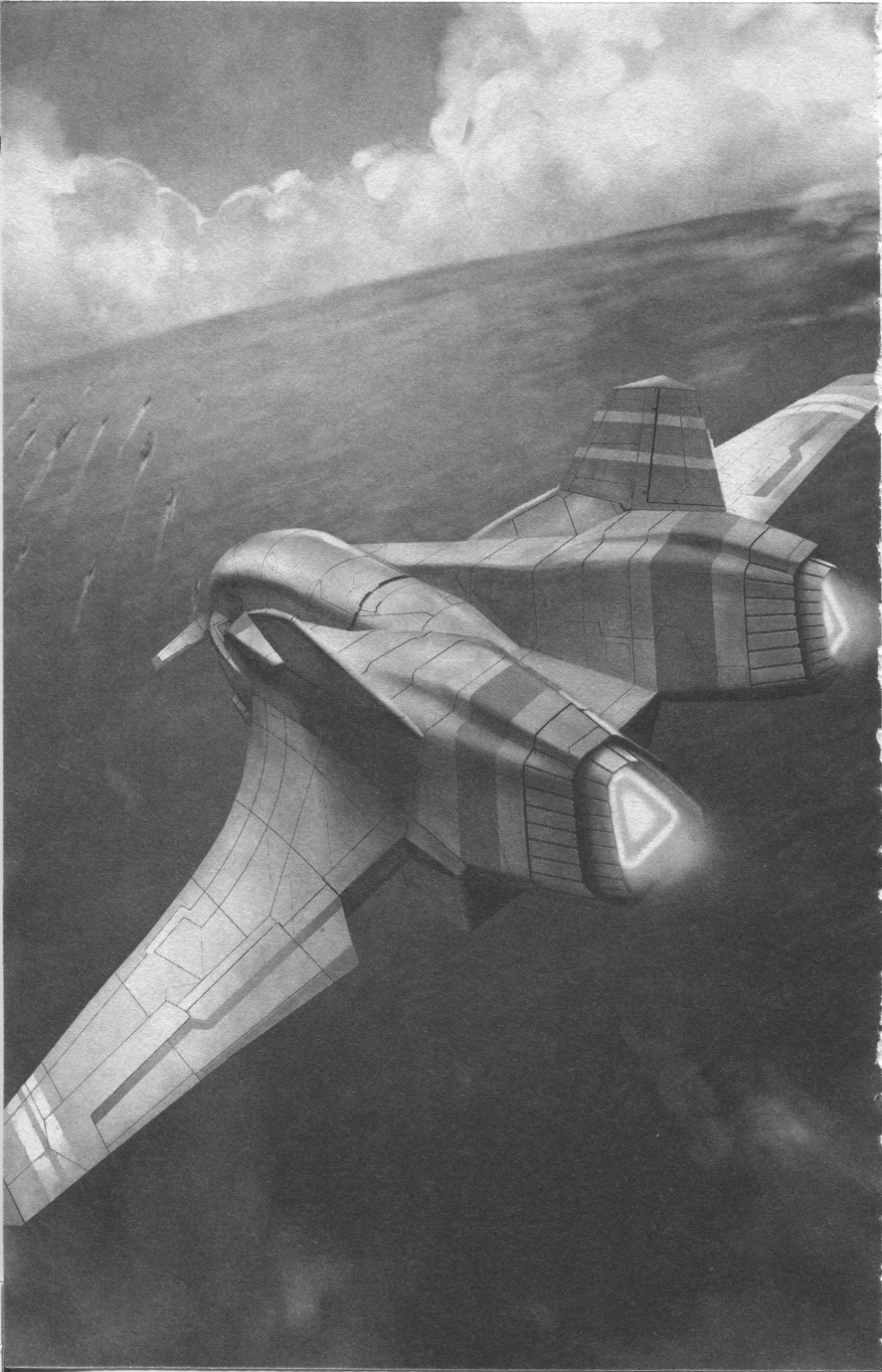
"I would say that the more of a military man Fleet Commander Maddox is, the more unlikely it is for the USN fleet to capture the Iberia Megafloat," I said, and both Latona and Hermes looked at me with puzzled expressions.

"Why not? Tactically speaking, it would make a lot of sense to capture a disabled military base now, wouldn't it?"

"That's an opinion you can only say because we know that the Iberia Megafloat is truly in a disabled state, right? But from Commander Maddox's point of view, there's no guarantee that this isn't a trap. If it was a USN special operations unit that disabled the military base, they might invade after seeing the results of that operation, but the ones who actually carried out the sabotage were Blauer Nebel, who are thought to be in contact with the Zaftra military. I don't think the USN military can trust them at all," I explained, and Bosch nodded.

"I see. As far as the USN fleet is concerned, since they weren't the ones that initiated it, it's still unclear what's happening on the Iberia Megafloat. If they were at a disadvantage and were trying to make a desperate turn around, they could go on the offensive, knowing the risk of falling into a trap, but that's not the case at all, and Commander Maddox isn't the type of commander who likes risky operations. In that sense, the most reasonable choice would probably be to hurry up and capture Madeira Island, which is probably the original operational target."

"Yes. But, despite that, if the USN fleet does come out to attack the Iberia Megafloat, I'll have to make a very unpleasant assumption. In that case, it's highly likely that Commander Maddox is in cahoots with Zaftra, just like Blauer Nebel," I said, lowering my voice a little. At this, Hermes' expression finally twitched and she groaned. "Are you saying that the USN Chief of Navy is a spy for Zaftra? That's just



too much... No, it's not impossible."

"Blauer Nebel, who made a name for themselves as the EC's most elite Wanzer unit, was able to destroy the Iberia Megafloat. I wouldn't be surprised if something bad were to happen," Bosch said, shaking his head gloomily.

"However, I would like the USN Fleet Commander to act in accordance with the national interest of the USN, not ZAFTRA. Otherwise, things will become complicated. Well, I'm not saying he should consider the EC's interests, though."

"For the time being, we haven't seen any reaction that would suggest it's from a USN fleet. If it's heading straight for the Iberia Megafloat, it should be within detection range soon," Captain Robert interrupted. Due to the camouflage, Zead had said that the aircraft's reconnaissance and patrol capabilities were low, but in truth, it was equipped to compete adequately with an average reconnaissance aircraft. Moreover, although it now required guidance from the ground, it was equipped with precision bombing capabilities, making it a universal fighter aircraft in name only, not a transport aircraft. After another twenty minutes of flying, Captain Robert made this assertion.

"It seems they aren't coming this way. If it was a single high-speed ship or a stealthy vessel it might have been possible to miss them, but if the entire fleet is coming, there's no reason for there to be so little reaction. Should we set course for Madeira Island?"

"Okay, I'll leave it to you," Zead replied immediately, and the transport plane made a large turn. And then, about an hour had passed.

"There it is," Captain Robert declared with confidence, even though there was no significant reaction on the detection equipment.

"It's still weak, but I've detected a USN military radar wave. If we get any closer, they'll probably fire a ship-to-air missile at us. Well, this distance is just at the edge of their effective range, so there's nothing to be afraid of.

"I see," Zead nodded with a serious expression.

"If the reaction was coming from an area where the fleet is unlikely to be, we would need to investigate further, but logically speaking, this reaction was coming from around here. There is no need to risk approaching to confirm. Instead, we must immediately inform the Iberia Megafloat and the garrison forces on Madeira Island."

"Understood, we'll withdraw and take some distance." Captain Robert changed the transport plane's course again, and Zead activated the communication device.

"This is the British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron. While flying in operational area KU1003, we detected military radar waves believed to be from the

USN fleet coming from the eastern sea area. Judging from the strength of the radar waves, the USN fleet appears to be heading east or southeast-east around operational area KR0952. Therefore, the fleet's target of invasion is presumed to be the Portuguese island of Madeira. That's all," Zead said unilaterally, hanging up the communication and looking around at us all.

"Well, I think we've done everything we can for the time being. Now it's up to the commanders of the Madeira Island garrison, the Iberia Megafloat, and the EC combined fleet to make a decision from their respective positions. Now that the USN fleet has entered combat mode, surely it's not possible to disable them by shutting down their systems?"

"Ah, that's simply impossible. It would be possible to carry out a cyber-terrorism attack simply to destroy the system, but it would involve losing control of an army that is already in combat mode, so one wrong move could lead to a catastrophe. If we launched such an attack, it would only incite hostility," Hermes replied in a gloomy tone, and Latona spoke with a sigh.

"Hermes, you should never tell anyone outside of Durandal, even if it's a mistake. If it becomes known that you were able to temporarily cause a loss of control over the USN fleet in combat mode, you will be immediately treated as a dangerous person by governments and military forces around the world, and you will be unable to move."

" Yes, I know. In reality, I'm not the only one who can do that, but no one actually tries, and we don't reveal our abilities to anyone except a very select few. Everyone puts their own safety first, and they're all smart enough to be worth it. I'd probably be the cleverest thing to do, too," Hermes said, shook his head.

"No good. If you're going to prioritize self-preservation and act smart, then there was no need for you to leave the USN in the first place. I honed my skills not to protect myself, but to avoid regrets. So, although I can't shut down the systems of the USN fleet, I'd like to try to contact Commander Maddox and persuade him. Whether he trusts me or not is a different matter, but I do have the Zafra military's Theta that I received from Darril as evidence."

"Hmm." Zead furrowed his brow and looked at Hermes.

"But can you communicate with a USN fleet that's in combat mode?"

"If the conditions are right, it can be done with this communication device. But we'll need to significantly shorten the distance to the USN fleet flagship," Captain Robert protested after hearing Hermes' response, before Zead did.

"Hey, hey. Flagships are usually located in the middle of the fleet. If you happen to

get too close, you'll be greeted by a barrage of anti-ship missiles."

"Ah, I also think it would be impossible to approach at sea. But what if we waited at the fleet's destination?" Hermes replied, looking surprisingly calm.

"Madeira is not very large. If we can hide somewhere on the island until the fleet approaches, the distance will inevitably close."

"So basically, you're going to wait for the USN vanguard forces to land on Madeira Island, the upcoming battlefield?" Latona asked, frowning, and Hermes nodded casually.

"That's the situation we're in. However, I want to avoid combat as much as possible."

"That being said, even if we wanted to avoid combat, I don't think the USN military would agree to that," Latona groaned with a sigh and shook her head.

"I don't want to back out now either. But a direct battle with the USN military is even more of a stretch than taking on the Zaftra military."

"That's why we'll avoid a head-on battle. I have almost no data on the Zaftra military, but I have collected a considerable amount of data, both public and private, on the USN military. We can't take down the systems of the entire fleet, but there is still quite a bit we can do," Hermes explained in a calm tone.

"It's probably impossible to do while flying, but if we land and stay still, I'm confident that we can fool the fleet's radar system and avoid being detected. If the Wanzers come searching for us, we can make it look like an accidental malfunction, stalling their search for about half a day. These are all underhanded tactics, but if we can communicate with the flagship and buy some time until we can persuade them, we should be able to manage it."

"Rather, the problem will be what happens after the communication is sent. If you send a direct message at that distance, your position will be known whether you like it or not, and if you try to fly away again, there's no way to deceive the radar. Unless the fleet commander gives the order to stop the attack, it's one of two things: you'll be hit by a ship-to-surface missile, or a ship-to-air missile," Zead pointed out, also in a matter-of-fact tone. Hermes then responded with a look of distress on her face.

"Yes, that's true. However, although Sheldon Lee Maddox is a soldier, he has a strong tendency to think politically. If he was launching an attack, that would be one thing, but he would probably think it would be bad for his reputation to suddenly fire a missile at someone who was trying to talk, and if he found out that the person in question was Sturges, he would want to avoid killing them if possible. Honestly, I feel really bad about saying it myself, but I don't think it's likely that Commander

Maddox would just kill us without asking any questions, unless we were extremely unlucky."

"Well, on the battlefield, such unfortunate events do occur quite often. But if you worry that much, you can't be a soldier," Bosch said, his tone strangely calm.

"Oh, that's not it. Durandal is not in the military, and we are not soldiers. Wait, does that mean we are the 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron of the British Army?"

"In any case, we only have two choices: go to the battlefield or not," Zead said firmly.

"To put it bluntly, the only ones who have any reason to go to the battlefield are Hermes, Captain Robert who flies the transport plane, and the flight staff. Even if the others, including myself, were to accompany us, there are no plans for us to do anything at the moment. The only time we'll have a Wanzer battle with the USN forces is if the worst really happens, and at that time, having one or two more pilots will be of little use. So, we won't force anyone to participate. If anyone wants to get off, we'll go back to the Iberia Megafloat and let them off. Robert, if you flight staff feel like you can't handle it anymore, feel free to get off. Between Hermes and me, we'll manage to fly the transport plane."

"So, Umari, Zead, you're going, right?" Captain Robert asked, and Zead nodded with a wry smile.

"Yes, I intend to go. But you have no obligation to associate with Death."

"That may be true, but it would be a shame to hand this aircraft over to you amateurs. We've finally gotten a grasp on its performance after modifications and it's just about ready to become easier to use," Captain Robert replied as if it was a matter of course.

"You're free to go wherever you want, but I'll be piloting this plane. I won't let you complain."

"Okay. I'll be happy to help you," said Zead, looking around at us.

"How about you guys?"

"Whatever, it seems like such a late answer. If I'm going to get off here, I'll get off when I'm going to Bassau," Latona replied immediately, and Bosch and I nodded in agreement.

"How stupid of you to get off when Hermes and Zead are going."

"Yes, I'd go even if they told me not to," Beck shouted as well.

"There's no need to ask! I'm a full-fledged member of Durandal after all! I won't be treated any differently ever again!"

"I understand, I understand," Zead nodded again with an expression that said, "Well,

I guess that's what happened."

"Well, there's no need to return to the Iberia Megafloat. We'll head straight for Madeira while avoiding the USN fleet. I'm counting on you, Robert."

"With the Iberia Megafloat not functioning, the EC combined fleet remaining in Lisbon, and no support coming from anywhere, there is no hope of stopping the invading USN forces no matter how hard we try. On the other hand, it would be extremely infuriating if we quickly withdrew all our forces and handed Madeira over to the USN without resistance," the Portuguese general commanding the Madeira garrison said in his usual frank tone when we contacted him, claiming to be the British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron, requesting permission to land.

"So currently, all of the garrison forces are withdrawing, leaving only the volunteers for the Wanzer team behind. By the time the USN fleet and landing forces arrive, the only ones left on the island will be the stubborn Wanzer pilots."

"Are you staying too, Your Excellency?" asked Zead, and the elderly commander of the garrison burst out in loud laughter.

"Oh, it was worth taking the Wanzer piloting training just in case something like this happened. Well, to be honest, I'm at my limit just moving it now."

"Understood. As we have received special orders from our home country, we will not be under your command, but we will provide as much support as we can. Therefore, due to the nature of this special order, we would like to land at a location that is not a regular military airport. Would you grant us permission?"

"Well, that's ok," the Commander replied rather matter-of-factly.

"You suppressed the Wanzer forces conducting sabotage on the Iberia Megafloat, and you conducted a risky patrol to locate the USN fleet. Whatever your true identity, you are a remarkable unit. I won't be so stingy as to say I won't give you permission unless I hear what your special mission is, and who gave you the order."

"...My honour," said Zead, sounding truly embarrassed, to which the Commander replied with a pleasant look on his face.

"Well, I wish you all the best, Elgar."

"I wish you the best of luck, Your Excellency. That's all," Zead said to Captain Robert after hanging up the communication.

"For now, we have been cleared to land. Please choose a location that is as likely to be out of radar's reach as possible and land the aircraft there."

"Understood," the captain nodded, then asked Zead in the same tone.

"It seems like the old commander has noticed my true identity."

"Yes. Unusually for an officer of his age, he has an interest in Wanzer tactics and was somewhat involved in the turmoil surrounding the establishment of Durandal. It's no surprise that he remembers me," Zead replied with a wry smile.

"It seems that His Excellency the Commander intends to pilot a Wanzer himself into battle, which may actually ensure his safety. Surely the USN regular military wouldn't shoot a Wanzer pilot who escaped after his unit was destroyed."

"Oh, I hope so," growled Latona gruffly.

"In the end, the USN has declared war on the EC. It seems that there is no way to stop the Madeira landing, but it would be better if the casualties were as few as possible."

"In that sense, even if it's just the Wanzer unit, it's not really desirable for the outnumbered defending side to stubbornly decide to resist. But I can understand all too well the determination or spirit of the defending forces, who are not going to let themselves not put up a fight to the end, even if they have no chance of winning," he said in a sincere tone, making Bosch dazzle.

"So, what exactly do you mean by supporting the defensive forces?"

"Actually, I haven't thought about anything specific. I just said it because I didn't think I could just sit back and do nothing," Zead said, shrugging his shoulders.

"If the top priority is to achieve persuasion, then perhaps it would be best to just sit back and watch. But after all these reckless acts, it doesn't seem like there's much point in prioritizing righteousness now. In any case, I intend to head out at my own pace, fire missiles at my own pace, and provide support to the garrison."

"In that case, we can just do what we like. It may be an inappropriate thing to say, but going head-to-head in actual combat with the USN military's Wanzer unit, which claims to be the strongest in the world, seems like it would be a very useful tactical experience," Bosch said with a grin, then Hermes spoke in a monotone.

"I'll go too. I want to try out the device that shuts down the systems of USN military Wanzers and see how effective it actually is. I can't say it out loud, but this is a golden opportunity."

"Oh, I think I'll be the one to test the device. It'll be dangerous for the Hermes if we don't equip it with advanced sensors, right?" Beck offered, seizing the opportunity.

"There's no way, in a situation like this, we can send a transport plane to bomb the USN forces from high altitude. If we tried to do something like that, we'd be targeted immediately with ship-to-air missiles. In that case, there's no point in me carrying the bombing guidance system. I think the rational response would be to switch to a Wanzer System Shutdown Device."

"I see, that's right. Let's change the equipment on Beck's machine," Hermes replied. Latona looked at me and sighed a little exaggeratedly.

"Really? Every single one of them is just thinking that they want to fight each other, that it's a great opportunity to test out their equipment, and that it's a mock battle. No matter what, they're underestimating the world-class USN military."

"That's right. If we let people with such naive ideas run wild, who knows what will happen. We need to follow up and make sure we tighten things up where we need to," I told Latona, agreeing with her. She then nodded with a small smile.

"In the end, everyone in Durandal is in the same boat."

"As expected, or rather, how should I put it... it's amazing, the USN military's concentrated wave attack with large quantities of material," groaned Bosch, in a tone that was neither impressed nor astonished.

"In short, it's an attack that relies on brute force, but the force is on an incredibly high level. This is limited to local battles, but there's no room for tactics or anything like that."

"Yes. The problem is where and against whom to concentrate that power in a local battle. That's a political issue, not a tactical one," Zead replied in a serious tone. The USN fleet, which arrived off the coast of Madeira, first struck the coastal defenses with a barrage of cruise missiles and ship-to-surface missiles, then sent out helicopters to airdrop assault-type Wanzers. The airborne invasion threw the defenses into disarray, making it impossible to concentrate attacks, and the assault landing craft forces rushed into the coast en masse, deploying long-range attack Wanzers and taking control with overwhelming firepower. It was a textbook assault amphibious operation. The defending forces fought well despite being outnumbered, shooting down helicopters before they could be detached from the airborne drop and thwarting six assault-type Wanzers at once, but that alone was not enough to turn the tide of the battle. In an airborne operation by the EC nations, if six Wanzers were neutralized without being able to do anything, it would be a sure failure at that point, but in the Madeira landing operation, at a glance, over a hundred Wanzers made airborne drops from helicopters, and twice that number jumped out of the assault landing craft. This is not a metaphor or an exaggeration, but it made me realize that the USN military's fighting power is on a different level. If you are overwhelmed by such a large number of Wanzers, as Bosch said, there is no point in tactics. The Wanzers of the defending forces retreated while fighting back, and we tried various support methods, such as firing missiles, launching diversionary attacks, and partially shutting down the systems, but even if we thwarted the

Wanzers in front of us, replacement forces would immediately arrive from the rear. It was no more than a temporary measure.

"Well, I think the subjugation will be complete soon, so the fleet may be approaching Madeira Island, " said Zead, dazzled as he avoided the advancing USN Wanzer forces, separated from the garrison and headed towards the mountains.

"Well then, shall we return to the transport plane?"

"That's right. We've collected plenty of data," Hermes said, then continued in a low voice.

"It would be easy if humans could act according to rules, like computers, according to data, but that's not how it works, after all."

"Of course," Latona replied in a slightly annoyed tone.

"I'm sure you understand, but if you communicate with Commander Maddox with such intentions, instead of persuading him, you will either anger him and have him turn you away, or you will be treated with contempt and dismissed."

"But, debates between politicians are kind of like a game. I think it would be effective to try and gauge what rules Commander Maddox follows as I speak to him," Bosch said, and Hermes glared at him as if talking to herself.

"We have all the data. Now all we have to do is try it out for ourselves." We then returned to the transport and Hermes began adjusting the communication device.

"Okay, now we should be able to interrupt the flagship's communications." Hermes glanced over at the computer display connected to the communicator, glared slightly, and picked up the communicator's microphone.

"This is Hermes Sturges, an employee of the EC Land Tactical Research Institute, Durandal. I have something urgent to convey to Vice Admiral Maddox, commander of the USN Atlantic Fleet, so I am making this call, although it is an irregular arrangement. I would like to put you through to the Vice Admiral."

"An EC research institute employee? How could someone like that have barged into this communication?" a man's voice, who sounded like he was a radio operator from the USN fleet flagship, replied in a panic.

"What are you trying to do? Is this a cyber-terrorism attack using communication waves?"

"Please stay calm. I have absolutely no intention of doing anything destructive towards the USN fleet. However, there is something I would like to tell you, Fleet Commander," Hermes appealed persistently in a polite tone that sounded like a completely different person than usual.

"I don't know if you can trust me with this, but the US Secretary of State is my uncle.

I work for the EC, but I am a US citizen. I have no intention of doing anything to harm my country."

"...Well said, from a man who was planning to shut down the USN fleet's systems," Latona whispered to me. But at that moment, perhaps Hermes's call worked, as the person on the other end of the line changed, and a heavy, calm male voice came over the radio.

"I'm Maddox. You're Hermes, nephew of Secretary of State Sturges, aren't you?"

"Yes, that's right," Hermes replied nervously, and Commander Maddox responded calmly.

"Well, I have heard many things about you from the Secretary of State. Some of them are sympathetic, some are surprising, some are unbelievable."

"Excuse me." Hermes' expression became extremely sour, wondering what on earth he had talked about with his uncle. Then Commander Maddox asked him bluntly.

"So, what's the story you want to tell me?"

"Durandal, the EC land-based new tactics research institute I work at, has received some interesting information from Venezuela. A unit using Wanzers identical to the unit that destroyed German military bases and new resource areas in Poland has appeared in Venezuela, and is supporting state governors who are calling for independence, causing problems for the USN forces. And, after analysing the information sent from Venezuela, it seems highly likely that they are a special operations unit of the Zaftra army," Hermes told Commander Maddox in an intentionally subdued tone.

"In other words, the Zaftra military has been sabotaging and weakening the EC, leading the USN military and government to believe that now is the perfect opportunity to seize Madeira from the EC. However, at the same time, they are sending elite soldiers to Venezuela, plotting to make it independent from the USN and turn it into a puppet for them. Durandal has determined that this incident is a plot by Zaftra to seize Venezuela."

"Hmm, so?" Commander Maddox asked lightly, not seeming at all upset. Hermes was at a loss for words for a moment, but quickly continued in a subdued tone.

"Should Madeira belong to Portugal, an EC member state, as an autonomous territory, or should it become independent and belong to the USN? I will not make a judgment on that point here. However, if Venezuela were to be lost, I believe that for the USN, even if they were to gain ten Madeiras, it would be a loss that could never be compensated for. I believe that the Atlantic Fleet should devote its military forces to the defense of Venezuela, rather than to the seizure of Madeira."

"That is not for you to judge, or for that matter, for me to judge," Commander Maddox replies calmly.

"Whether to send the Atlantic Fleet to Madeira or to Venezuela is a decision that our government will make. I am here on orders from my government. I cannot leave Madeira of my own accord unless I receive new orders to move the fleet to Venezuela or anywhere else."

"...That's true," Bosch glared. And it seemed that Hermes had decided to change his tactic.

"Understood. I will send you the information that Durandal has obtained from Venezuela. I would like the USN government to review this and decide where to send the Atlantic Fleet."

" Well, we'd be happy to receive any information, but there's just one problem," Commander Maddox pointed out calmly.

"We have heard that you have advanced skills, for better or worse, when it comes to handling computers and networks. We have no way of knowing whether the information you claim to provide is actually sent from Venezuela, whether it is something you have fabricated, or whether it is designed to cause serious harm to the recipient."

"That's certainly true, but the latest local information on Venezuela should also be coming through the USN government via the expeditionary forces. If we compare it with that reliable information, no matter how much plausible information I fabricate at my desk, even though I haven't been there, it will definitely be exposed. On the other hand, if the data is harmful... well, your fleet should already know the location of this communication, so if they decide that I have betrayed my country, they can immediately fire ship-to-surface missiles or whatever. If they don't try to check the information they receive with the fleet, and send it to the home government in a compressed state, there will be no damage to the fleet, so I think they can attack at any time," Hermes replied in an equally calm voice. Commander Maddox then let out a light chuckle.

"That is certainly true. I cannot yet judge whether you are trying to provide us with useful information, or if you are trying to pull a grand deception. Or perhaps both. However, it seems certain that you are risking your life. It would be unbearable to reject someone who is making such an effort to approach us, citing a vague sense of danger. In fact, it seems rather cowardly. Please use this communication line to send the information. I will forward it to your government under my responsibility."

"Thank you," Hermes said, and began sending the data as quickly as possible,

before the other person changed their mind.

"But Commander Maddox, how should I put it, is a much more generous person than I expected," Hermes replied with a bit of annoyance, as Zead glared at him.

"Yeah, that was way better than I'd imagined. Far from being persuasive, it felt like I was playing the puppet in my hand."

"Well, his opponent is the man in charge of the world-renowned USN Navy, a literally accomplished big shot. Even if Hermes is a genius, it's probably a decade too early for him to take on him properly," Latona commented bluntly.

"But my life-risking attitude was appreciated, and the negotiations were successful in the end, so I think it was a good thing."

"Telling them to go ahead and shoot if you think they've betrayed me was just me being brazen, but soldiers really love that sort of thing," Hermes growled with a complicated expression, and then a receiving sound rang out from the comm.

"This is Maddox. Is Hermes Sturges there?"

"This is Hermes. Have you received the results of the intelligence analysis from your government?" Hermes responded in a somewhat stiff tone, to which Commander Maddox replied calmly.

"No, not yet. However, our fleet has been suddenly attacked by a large submarine carrier of unknown affiliation, a carrier-based helicopter, and an airborne Wanzer unit mounted on the helicopter. The enemy numbers are small, so I think we should be able to repel them without any problems, but until the situation is resolved, this line will be unavailable. I advise you to remain calm and not move from your current position until the line is restored."

"Commander Maddox! That surprise attack force has been dispatched from Venezuela by the Zaftra military to distract from the Atlantic Fleet! The data you sent me earlier listed a flight route from Venezuela to Madeira Island, and I was wondering what that was all about. I see, that's what it was!" Hermes said in a high-pitched voice, and Commander Maddox chuckled lightly.

"I see. Officially, I forwarded the data you sent me without looking at it, so I can't say anything about that. But perhaps this surprise attack force confirms your information. In any case, you may have thought that the Atlantic Fleet had let its guard down after completing the operation to seize Madeira Island, but you are really making a fool of us. We will counterattack using the full extent of our fleet's air defense capabilities, so please do not get in our way. That's all," and with that, Commander Maddox ended the communication.

"...That's what I think, but what should we do?"

"We have no choice but to stay put as we were told. Commander Maddox doesn't seem to be cutting corners on defense, and if we make a bold move, it will only disrupt the USN fleet," Hermes asked, to which Zead replied in a tone that said there was no choice. Then Bosch tilted his head and glared.

"The route from Venezuela to Madeira was apparently intended as a diversionary attack on the USN fleet. So what was the other route to France? Was it intended as a diversionary attack on somewhere if the EC gained the upper hand?"

MISSION 12:

Final Battle

"The USN government has withdrawn its declaration of war against the EC, the USN fleet has shifted to Venezuela, and the captured garrison commander and Wanzer pilots have been released. However, Madeira Island itself remains occupied by the USN military," he said in the central control room of Durandal HQ, where he had returned for the first time in a long time. Hermes was glaring at him with an unsatisfied look on her face as she pulled up information on the monitor.

"I feel like I've been manipulated by Commander Maddox. If we don't handle this properly, it could have a major negative impact on the future."

"That's true, but there's no point in rushing for a solution. There are also reports that the USN government has announced that it will conduct a thorough investigation into the financial base of the Madeira Free Independence Council, which instigated the invasion. Let's hope for diplomatic efforts from the EC and a comeback by the moderate faction in the USN government, led by your uncle," Zead responded in a calm tone.

"At least the risk of war escalating between the USN and EC has been reduced. That alone is a big enough achievement."

"So, how is the situation in Venezuela?" Bosch asked. Hermes replied with a slight shrug.

"Something strange has happened. According to the latest information, a local guerilla or political organization called Just Venezuela has taken the governor into custody and forced him to declare a change of government. This organization appears to have retracted the policy of independence from the USN that the previous governor had put forward, but it does not appear to be cooperating with the USN military, and the reports have given very mixed reviews. Incidentally, there is no information whatsoever about any units that resemble the ZAFTRA military."

"Maybe the people Darril was talking about working with were Fair Venezuela," Latona asked as I glared at her.

"Speaking of Darril, wasn't the transport plane sent by Durandal to evacuate the country supposed to arrive in Venezuela today?"

"Yes, it's nine p.m. local time, so it'll be a little while longer. If the transport plane picks up Darril and the others as scheduled and returns, we might be able to get some more data on the Zaftra military in Venezuela," Hermes frowned and glared at my answer.

"We probably don't need that data anymore, but the USN military will want it."

"How you use it is up to you," Latona told Hermes, when suddenly the operator uttered a surprised voice.

"Father 1 has received a message from the British Prime Minister. It appears that he has arrived above HQ in his special plane!"

"Pass it over here," Zead responded calmly.

"You have played an extremely important role in this incident. As the Prime Minister of the UK, as a leader of an EC member state, and as an individual who desires peace, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude, " said British Prime Minister Lionel Noland in a rather passionate tone as he stepped off his private jet and appeared before us. I believe his sincerity and enthusiasm are genuine, but to be honest, what made the biggest impression on me was the slightly embarrassed smile of Under-Secretary Allison, who was accompanying the Prime Minister.

"Thank you very much for your generous support," he replied politely. Then Zead turned to Prime Minister Noland and asked in careful wording.

"By the way, is there something special that has brought you here today?"

"Yes. In fact, I plan to send special forces to Kursk in Zaftra territory and obtain evidence that the Zaftra military has sent armed Wanzer units into EC territory through the pipeline," Prime Minister Noland stated decisively and with a straight face.

"The data you obtained from your Venezuelan collaborators has made it clear that Zaftra was plotting against the USN. However, there is still no solid evidence that the Wanzer units that carried out sabotage within EC territory, resulting in many casualties, were dispatched from Zaftra. The testimony of the Blauer Nebel pilots captured on the Iberia Megafloat also insisted that they were simply following the orders of their superiors, so Zaftra's involvement cannot be proven. Furthermore, with both their superiors, Brigadier General Glaser and Major Wagner, still missing, Germany's responsibility may be held accountable, but it seems unlikely that they will be able to go any further in the near future. However, it is absolutely unacceptable to leave Zaftra's responsibility ambiguous. In the future, when building international relations with the USN, Zaftra, or OCU, if the EC countries are perceived as lacking the ability or courage to identify the people who attacked them, it could lead to a second or third tragedy."

"So, the attack on Kursk is the plan," groaned Zead, with a somewhat complicated expression.

"Unless we do it well, it could turn into the situation where Britain, or rather the EC, starts a war against Zaftra."

"That's true, but we have no choice but to do this cleverly. We plan to deploy the latest stealth airborne transport aircraft and elite members of the First Airborne

Corps, and if possible, we would like you to take part in this operation as well." We all looked at each other as the Prime Minister spoke.

"Participating in the operation...is it okay for us to take part in a British military operation?" I asked timidly, and Prime Minister Noland replied curtly.

"Of course there are problems. But they're nothing compared to the sudden creation of the British Army's 105th Special Combat Resupply Squadron. It just means that the 1st Airborne Corps will have a few more personnel and wanzers that aren't on the official roster."

"Understood. I'll participate. Since I've been involved this far, I want to see it through to the end," said Zead, looking around at us.

"What about you guys? I won't force you though."

"Of course I'll participate," Latona replied, dazzled, "I know it can't be helped, since I'm in front of the Prime Minister, but it would be rude to even ask," and everyone nodded in unison. Then the Prime Minister smiled with satisfaction.

"Thank you. I'm truly grateful." But at that moment, I didn't miss the slight movement of Deputy Secretary Allison's lips. Although she didn't say it out loud, she dazzled a little.

"Having the First Airborne Forces and Durandal conduct a joint operation... it's obvious that both will end up suffering, but the Prime Minister's sudden impulse is troubling."

"It's been a long time, Zead Elgar," said Colonel Gerald Telford, commander of the First Airborne Corps, with a somewhat sarcastic smile as he shook Zead's hand.

"I'm glad to see you're doing well. The last time I saw you, you seemed exhausted from all the paperwork, so why don't you just go ahead and return to the military?"

"No, that's not true. If I had remained in the British Special Forces, I would never have been able to gather these members. I'm proud of these members," said Zead decisively, but then he laughed and continued.

"That being said, it is true that some of the members of the First Airborne Corps are somewhat lacking in airborne landing skills and are therefore not suited to accompanying the demonic First Airborne Corps. We can't start practical training right now, but is this transport plane equipped with the First Airborne Corps' specialty, a simulation of hell?"

"Of course. If you'd like to use it, I'd be happy to lend it to you," Colonel Telford nodded with a grin, and Zead turned around and said.

"Hermes, Beck, you two will conduct the First Airborne Force's airborne drop simulation until we reach our destination. If you do not clear the required points, you

will not be allowed to participate in the operation."

"But now..." Hermes started to protest, but Zead cut her off sternly.

"I have seen your descent skills on the Iberian Megafloat. If we were conducting an operation on our own, we could adjust the operation based on your skills, but since we are conducting joint operations with other units, that is not possible."

"I understand. Then I won't descend, but I'll wait in the transport plane. I plan to adjust the system down device that we tested on Madeira Island to suit the Zaftra military Wanzers based on the data I received from Darril, so I don't have time to do an airborne landing simulation," Hermes replied with a slightly sulky look on her face.

"I think it would be more operationally beneficial to have the system down device available than to just train airborne drop skills, am I right?"

"That's right. Hermes, please concentrate on your work," Zead said as if it was a matter of course, then he looked at Beck.

"And Beck, if you don't pass the airborne drop simulation, I'll ride in your Wanzer equipped with a system down device. Okay?"

"Yeah, sure. I can't say it's bad. But, if it's come to this, I'll do whatever it takes to clear this hellish simulation and join the operation!" Beck shouted, half in desperation. "Well, if I could improve my skills just by sheer determination, it wouldn't be that hard," Latona whispered, dazzling. And then I made a proposal to Zead.

"Um, can I use the airborne drop simulation? I'm not that good at airborne drops myself, so I thought it would be helpful."

"Well, with your skills I don't think it will be a problem, but it wouldn't hurt to give it a try," Zead told the group.

"Everyone, board the Wanzers. Transfer them to the First Airborne Force's transport plane immediately."

"What a pain. Zead has gone back to his military ways," Hermes muttered, quietly but loud enough for me to hear. Latona responded in a merciless tone.

"Well, it can't be helped since we're operating together with the military. If you have a problem with it, you can only take it up with Prime Minister Noland, who planned the joint operation."

"That's right, it has always been the fate of military men to be manipulated by politicians," Bosch agreed nonchalantly.

"And if you don't want to be manipulated, you have no choice but to become the one doing the manipulating."

"...That's the last thing I'd want," groaned Hermes, with a very serious look on her

face.

"Countdown, three, two, one, descend!" Following the unique airborne force countdown, two counts shorter than normal, I sprinted out of the transport plane. Compared to previous airborne drops, this felt extremely rushed, but having experienced this hellish simulation, I realized that the transport plane pilots were actually holding back. Colonel Telford and the rest of the First Airborne Forces had already descended first, and we were to descend after them, in the order of Latona, myself, Bosch, and Zead. Unfortunately, Beck was unable to clear the simulation in the end and was not given permission to participate in the operation.

"But maybe it was a good thing I couldn't participate." I felt dizzy as I watched the flashes that seemed to come from gunfire flashing brightly on the ground shrouded in darkness. In order to make the most of the stealth capabilities of the transport planes, the raid on Kursk had been carried out on a moonless night, which made landing difficult to begin with. Moreover, Colonel Telford said with a straight face that it would have been perfect if it had been raining. The sensibilities of the airborne forces members were quite different from those of civilians like Hermes and Beck, let alone us military Wanzer pilots.

"Earlier, Zead had said that there was a special unit in the UK that would rather commit suicide than be captured. Perhaps that unit was none other than the First Airborne Forces." In the very short time between taking off from the transport plane and landing, I had some pretty scary thoughts. What if the First Airborne Forces, like the Zaftra special forces, shot the pilots of the Wanzers they had destroyed in order to leave no witnesses? Or what if they forced their injured or captured comrades to commit suicide? It was by no means an impossible fantasy.

"Well, if that happens, we'll have to wait and see. But maybe Zead didn't let Hermes and Beck join just because of their landing skills." Hoping that it wouldn't come to that, I looked around as I landed, dazed. The sound of machine gun fire echoed quite far away, and it seemed like a fairly fierce battle was taking place, but the area around where I had landed was extremely quiet.

"The Kursk pipeline station is this way," I confirmed, and started moving. The purpose of this operation was not to defeat or annihilate the enemy. All I needed was to obtain operational data that showed armed Wanzer units being sent from Kursk to Bassau via the pipeline and then withdrawing.

"It looks like the First Airborne Force is trying to secure the airfield. It's true that if the transport planes can't land, they can't withdraw. It's a necessary task, but I don't think there's any need for me to go out of my way to make a detour and join them

there." While checking the location and direction of the place where the battle is happening, I drive the Wanzer towards the pipeline station. It's good that we don't encounter any enemies, but it's a problem that we can't join up with our allies. We can't be that far away from Latona and Bosch, who landed before and after us, but we've turned off our identification signals as we're operating undercover, so we can't confirm each other's positions. Having said that, I don't want to attract attention by scattering communication waves, when it seems that the enemy hasn't noticed us. In the end, I decided to let things take their course and let the Wanzer proceed, but somehow, we arrived at the Kursk pipeline station without encountering either the enemy or our allies.

"Well, this is a problem," I thought to myself as I stood my Wanzer facing the main entrance of the pipeline control facility building, which was dotted with lights. In order to obtain the data, I would have to get out of the Wanzer and enter the building, but naturally, this would leave the remaining Wanzer completely defenseless. Suddenly, a Wanzer appeared from the right of the building. For a moment, I braced myself, but then I realized that its silhouette was a slender, agile-looking Traubel, impossible for a Zaftra military Wanzer to be.

"Latona?"

"Ah, Elsa. The truth is, I made a mistake in landing point during descent and almost got stuck in a swamp. Of all people, I know the terrain around here well, so if I made a mistake like that, I'd be the laughing stock of my family for the rest of my life. I managed to get out without calling for help and desperately tried, but, man, I'm in trouble," Latona said with a wry smile, and indeed, parts of her machine, including the legs and shield, were covered in mud.

"What about the rest of them?"

"I haven't seen anyone since we landed. I was lucky to get here without stepping into the swamp, but maybe Bosch and Zead got caught up in it. The First Airborne Corps seems to be fighting at the airfield." Latona sounded confused at my answer.

"So it'll just be the two of us. Well, one of us will have to get off the Wanzer and retrieve the data, but to be honest, I'm not very good with computers. However, the signs inside the building will probably be written in Zaftra language, so I might have a slight advantage in that respect."

"I'm not as good with computers as Hermes or Bosch. I think you'd probably be better at finding the data. But, if the signs inside the building were only in Zaftra, I'd be completely at a loss," I said, sighing a little deliberately, and Latona gave a small laugh.

"Maybe there's English translation too, but if there isn't, that would be disappointing. Okay, I'm not too sure if I can get the right data, but I'll go. If Bosch comes before I get back, tell him to come and help."

"Yes, I understand. I'll secure this place, so please leave it to us," I replied, and Latona got off the Wanzer and went into the building by herself. About fifteen minutes had passed since then.

"This is Zead. Is that Latona or Elsa in front of the control building?"

"It's Elsa. Latona has left the Wanzer and entered the building to secure the operational data."

"I see. The truth is, the Bosch machine got stuck in the mud by mistake, but my machine is not stable enough to pull it out. If we're not careful, we might get pulled in too," said a perplexed Zead, as a hybrid Wanzer, the one originally used by Beck, appeared, consisting of the body of a Sender and the legs of a Cicada II attached to it.

"I'll secure this place, so can you go and help the Bosch machine? The mud doesn't seem to be deep enough for the Wanzer to sink completely, but it will probably take a long time to free itself."

"Understood. Please give me the position of the Bosch unit and the terrain data for the surrounding area." Thinking that this was starting to develop strangely, I received the data from Zead's unit and left the scene. As for how I managed to pull out the Bosch unit that had gotten stuck in the swamp, I'll skip that, as it's just annoying to remember and not very interesting at all. However, to give you an idea of how difficult the task was, consider the fact that in order to pull out the unit, the Bosch unit had no choice but to abandon both of its machine guns in the mud. And then, quite exhausted, mentally if not physically, I was about to return to the control building with the muddy Bosch unit when Zead contacted me in a tense voice.

"Elsa! If you're able to move, Bosch, please come over here quickly! Latona has encountered a group of what appear to be Zaftra soldiers inside the control facility building and is now in a state of combat! We need to provide support quickly, but my Wanzer can't get inside the building!"

"...That's true, missiles aren't going to do anything," groaned Bosch as he hastily drove the Wanzer.

"However, my Wanzer is also barehanded, and I'll probably have to enter the building to get the data anyway. I'll have no choice but to go and provide support in my bare flesh.

"That's right. I think it's too risky to attack the building from outside with a Wanzer

when our allies are inside. Even if we avoid Latona's location and attack, we don't know how the repercussions will affect it, and we might even destroy the machine containing the data. I'll get off the Wanzer as well and join in to provide physical support," Bosch pointed out in a serious tone when I told him.

"Attacking with a Wanzer certainly poses a high risk, but the only personal weapons we have are pilot handguns. I don't know what kind of equipment the enemy has, but it's only natural that they have assault rifles. If we fought head-on without the Wanzers, we wouldn't have a chance of winning."

"Well..." I thought to myself, wondering if there was a good plan. And then, about five minutes later. Bosch and I got off the Wanzer and entered the pipeline control facility building through the front door. According to the communication from the mobile communication device, Latona was going to the computer floor on the eighth floor, and when she reached the sixth floor by stairs, she encountered a group of what appeared to be Zaftra soldiers on that floor. They started shooting without question, so I hurried down to the fifth floor, but people were coming up from the floor below and I was about to be attacked in both directions, so I escaped to the fifth floor, broke the lock on a small room that seemed to be a storage room, entered, and barricaded myself inside. If there was no hope of support from outside, I would have been a mere rat in a bag, but as a tactic to buy time and wait for support, it was indeed the right one. If I were in her position, I doubt I would have been able to act so calmly.

"The enemy are gathered in a chaotic fashion on both sides of the corridor that runs past the room where Latona is holed up. We'll hide in the staircase to the fifth floor and rush out at the same time as Zead comes to our aid." I said in a nervous tone, even to myself, as I outlined our attack plans, and Bosch responded in his usual nonchalant manner.

"If we were to get into a proper gunfight, we would have no chance of winning, no matter the weapons or the numbers. Timing is everything."

"That's right," I nodded, gripping my handgun tightly. Although I had received a full range of individual combat and shooting training in the French army, as a Wanzer pilot I had never been in actual combat without armour. Or rather, during my time in the French army I had never even been in actual combat with a Wanzer, so perhaps that was only natural. In that respect, Bosch, who had experienced the hell that was Huffman, had been through a different number of carnage. I hadn't confirmed it, but it was probably not his first time in actual combat with armour. I took out my handheld communicator and sent a message in a calm voice.

"It's Bosch. Elsa and I have reached the stairs to the fifth floor. Do it," as if they had heard our voices, the men who looked like Zaftra soldiers on the other side of the corridor shouted and pointed in our direction. And the moment they aimed what looked like assault rifles in our direction, a powerful impact shook the building, and the Zaftra soldiers were taken by surprise and mowed down. Zead, who had switched to the Latona's machine, aimed at the area where the enemies were gathered and slammed the pile bunker from outside the building. Of course, the pile bunker's blow had tremendous destructive power, but compared to firing a machine gun or a shotgun at a building, the damage was much more limited. And, having anticipated the impact of the pile bunker and prepared ourselves, we jumped out from behind the stairs at the same time the Zaftra soldiers were mowed down. As per the plan, I aimed my handgun at the arms and legs of the Zaftra soldiers who were trying to get up, but Bosch was no match for them. He was the first to pick up the assault rifle the enemy had dropped, and leaving the fallen soldiers to me, he fired a volley at the enemy who was trying to get up a short distance away.

"Elsa, if you can handle it, it would be more advantageous to use an assault rifle."

"Ah, yes." I quickly used up all the bullets in my handgun and picked up the assault rifle as instructed. Of course, there are many parts that are different from the guns used by the French military, but the basic structure seems to be the same. At that moment, Latona came rushing out of the room she had barricaded herself in. Although she had a handgun in her hand, she didn't seem to be about to fire and just ran towards me as fast as she could.

"Okay, we've escaped successfully. Let's go up to the computer floor," Bosch said, picking up another assault rifle and tossing it to Latona. Then we all sprinted towards the stairs.

"Do you think they'll regroup and attack again?" Latona asked Bosch after they had all three of them running up the stairs from the fifth floor to the seventh and eighth floors in one go. Bosch shook his head.

"I don't know. In the first place, we don't know the enemy's numbers, their morale, or how much damage they caused, so it's impossible to make an estimate."

"That's right. No matter how the enemy responds, we just need to achieve our objective." Saying this, Latona quickly readjusted her assault rifle and stepped into the computer room. Bosch followed, walking over to one of the many control terminals lined up, powering it on and starting it up.

"Okay, it looks like the operational data hasn't been erased. We can just download it to a data disk and take it with us," Bosch said, glaring with relief as he quickly

tapped the keyboard. Then Latona asked, looking a little suspicious.

"Why didn't they just wipe the data like they did in Bassau? They had plenty of time."

"Unlike Bassau, Kursk Station is currently in operation. If we were to carelessly erase the operational data, it would have a negative impact on the entire pipeline," Bosch replied as he inserted a data disk into the terminal's slot.

"But it is odd that the Zaftra military, who would not hesitate to blow up a pipeline if necessary, would hesitate to do something so minor. Maybe they didn't even realize that we were after the operational data."

"That's right," a heavy voice suddenly rang out from the entrance to the computer room. Latona reflexively fired her assault rifle, but the giant shadow that stood in the entrance dodged with surprising speed.

"Are you going to start a shootout without asking any questions? You may be able to hide in the shadows, but your terminals and data disks won't be able to. Are you going to give up the operational data and fight me?"

"Brigadier General Glaser..." Bosch groaned bitterly.

"If you're in Kursk now, does that mean you were acting on Zaftra's orders? To be honest, I didn't want to believe it."

"So you're Lieutenant Dieter Bosch, a former member of Durandal and former German military officer. Have you overcome your experience on Huffman Island?" Brigadier General Glaser said as he stepped into the computer room. Wearing what looked like a Wanzer pilot suit and holding a large machine gun rather than an assault rifle, his appearance was as impressive as that of a Wanzer, without any metaphor or exaggeration.

"I don't want to make excuses now, but unlike Wagner, I am not loyal to Zaftra. Even though the Zaftra people cooperated with Wagner, they were reluctant to follow my orders. If my orders had been followed, the pipeline operation data would have been erased and you would have been confronted by a platoon of the Zaftra army in this room, but, well, now that things have come to this, that's a minor issue."

"If you are not a person who pledges loyalty to ZAFTRA, it is even more difficult to understand. Why did you team up with ZAFTRA and betray the EC? Was it because you felt obligated to the German Chancellor, who was involved in pipeline smuggling?" Bosch asked in a serious tone. Glaser shook his head slightly.

"That's not true either. The petty thoughts of politicians, such as winning or losing an election, or whether their secret dealings with companies will be revealed or not, are of no concern to me. I simply wanted my homeland, Germany, to be strong and

stable. To that end, I served in the military and dedicated my life to maintaining public order. However, the situation both inside and outside Germany is moving in a direction that I do not want, a direction that I fear. The pipeline to Zaftra, which was built at great expense, was abolished with a single vote of the EC, and in order to obtain resources necessary for military development, Germany is moving to Poland and We have to watch the reactions of neighboring countries. Moreover, the stupid generals of the army did not organize the military equipment that they had invested their scarce resources into as an effective mobile force, but instead turned it into a stationary defensive force. No matter how many state-of-the-art, high-performance Wanzers they had, it was meaningless if they just stood there like scarecrows in the base. I risked my job to give my advice many times, and in the end, I even went to great lengths to curry favor with politicians, using as much influence as I could to change the status quo of the German army. But in the end, nothing changed.

"So, you had the Zaftra army attack a German army base?" Bosch growled, and Glaser gave a small laugh. When I first met him, I thought it was impossible to imagine this man laughing, but when I actually saw him, it wasn't a frightening or insane laugh, but a horrifyingly lonely, self-deprecating smile.

"That's right. In the end, the destruction of five army bases and the complete annihilation of the German Army except for Blauer Nebel was nothing but my anger towards the German Army, who were content with a paper tiger. The Zaftra side proposed a plan to strike a blow at Poland's new resource-rich areas, but I responded that in order to strike Poland, it was necessary to destroy the German bases first, and that the destruction of German bases could be easily achieved if we caught them off guard. In reality, attacking Poland first would have been a complete surprise and would have been more effective, but I really wanted to destroy the useless German bases first. However, the price was high. Things in Germany "I expected that I would be able to use my authority to fabricate any investigation I wanted, but you guys from Durandal made an unexpected intervention. The landing point in Denmark that we had prepared as a fake retreat route was seized first, and the defenses of the new resource areas in Poland were strengthened, leaving Wagner and I at a loss, but the Zaftra side said that they absolutely could not change the plans for the attack on Poland. We had no choice but to go ahead with the operation, but thanks to your efforts the new resource areas in Poland were not annihilated, and the retreating troops were pursued, forcing Blauer Nebel to provide support at the risk of being suspected. Because of this, I lost the trust of both Germany and Zaftra, and I was forced to hand over command of Blauer Nebel to

Wagner."

"I see. So Blauer Nebel's sabotage of the Iberia Megafloat was not your order," Bosch said in a sympathetic tone. Glaser nodded with a self-deprecating smile.

"If we were to do something like that, then Blauer Nebel would definitely not be able to continue, whether we succeed or fail. To me, the organization known as Blauer Nebel was a project I had devoted my life to, but to Zaftra, it was nothing more than an expendable item."

"In that case, Brigadier General, you should return to Germany and reveal everything. If things continue as they are, you will be seen as a pawn of Zaftra, just like Wagner. That would be an undesirable assessment for you," Bosch urged, his voice suddenly stronger. But Glaser shook his head.

"No, it would be more convenient for Germany, which will soon have to face merciless denunciations from the EC countries, if we were to say that it was all a conspiracy by Zaftra and that I was also his pawn. If I were to return, it would only cause unnecessary chaos," said Glaser, returning to his solemn, frightening expression as he continued.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Bosch, for listening to the complaints of a man who lost everything out of anger and resentment for his country. You all take the data disk and head to EC. I will remain in Zaftra."

"That won't work. It may be inconvenient for Germany, but you have a duty to make the truth public to the victims and their families," I said sternly, and Latona suddenly threw the assault rifle she was holding at Glaser. She must have thought he might shoot, but she didn't seem to expect him to throw a weapon, as Glaser, in a bit of a panic, knocked the assault rifle down. In the meantime, Latona pulled out her handgun and fired, aiming at Glaser's leg. However, even though I was sure I had hit him, no blood spurted from Glaser's leg, and it didn't even budge. Before I even realized that it was bulletproof armor, I fired my assault rifle in rapid succession, but it had no effect, and Glaser fled the room.

"Wait!"

"No, don't chase!" Bosch stopped Latona as she started to jump out.

"Are you going to show me mercy?" Bosch responded calmly to Latona, who turned around with a stern expression.

"That's not true. He's equipped with a machine gun and bulletproof armor. If we were to fight him head on, we would clearly be at a disadvantage. There might still be some Zaftra people left, so we should get the data disk and quickly go outside and get in the Wanzer."

"Hmph," Latona snorted, but stopped and picked up the assault rifle she had thrown. Bosch then removed the disk containing the downloaded pipeline operation data from the terminal, placed it in its case and put it in his uniform's inner pocket, then said as if nothing had happened.

"Come on, let's pull it out."

"I see, Glaser..." They each got into a van and were on their way to the airfield that the First Airborne Force had secured. Hearing that Brigadier General Glaser had shown up at the pipeline control facility building, Zead let out a complicated voice.

"But even so, the attack on the German military base was ultimately just a way for him to vent his frustration. So in a sense, the Zaftra military was also used."

"That's right. If Poland's new resource-rich areas had been attacked and completely destroyed as the Zaftra army had intended from the beginning, I think the situation and how things would have played out would have been very different," Latona replied in a brusque tone.

"Although, I think that in that case, suspicion may have fallen on Zaftra sooner. If the EC is no longer able to procure its own resources, it is clear that Zaftra will be the one to benefit the most. This is a short-sighted, transparent, and foolish crime, on the level of setting fire to a rival's store just because your products aren't selling."

"I have recorded Glaser's speech on my portable communication device. I quickly turned the recording button on, and it seems to have been recorded surprisingly clearly," Bosch said in a monotone voice.

"I don't know if this is valid as testimony, but I think it would be best to have Deputy Secretary Allison hear it. What do you think?"

"That's right. This operation was led by the British military. The spoils will have to be handed over to the sponsors," Zead replied somewhat sarcastically.

"However, if we were to suddenly tell Prime Minister Noland directly, things might get confusing. It would be best to go through Undersecretary Allison."

"Look. It looks like a transport plane has landed at the airport." A jet-black stealth transport plane came down, making a faint sound that was hard to believe was that of a descending plane. At the time, I had no doubt that if we got on this plane and left Kursk, this incident would be closed, but I was wrong.

"Operation objective accomplished. No losses of personnel. Loss of equipment, one Wanzer, and four Wanzer cannons. That's all," Colonel Telford confirmed in a perfectly calm tone, and the transport plane carrying us immediately took off from the airfield.

"Are you going back to London?"

"No, we're going to Paris," Colonel Telford replied casually to Zead's question.

"Prime Minister Norland is currently in Paris to address the European Parliament. We have been ordered to deliver the results of Kursk directly to him."

"Paris..." Gide groaned, frowning, and Colonel Telford asked suspiciously.

"What's the matter? Is there something inconvenient about being in Paris?"

"Well, in the Zaftra military documents we obtained from our Venezuelan collaborators, there was a flight route from Venezuela to Madeira, and a flight route from Venezuela to France. When we first got the documents, we had no idea why the Zaftra military had set up such flight routes, but the route to Madeira was actually used as a surprise attack on the USN fleet that had occupied the island. That leaves up what is the remaining route to France? Putting aside whether the Venezuelan Zaftra military would actually use that route to launch an attack, it seems as if they might have had a plan to launch a surprise attack on the EC parliament in Paris," Colonel Telford's eyes widened as Zead explained.

"Are you saying that the Zaftra army is going to launch a surprise attack on Paris from Venezuela? When and why?"

"This is only a guess, but it seems that the Venezuelan Zaftra military wanted to keep the USN Atlantic Fleet pinned down in the EC area. For that to happen, the EC's military strength needed to be weakened and fighting needed to break out on Madeira, but at the same time, it would be troublesome if the USN fleet won too easily. For that reason, they were probably planning to carry out sabotage or surprise attacks depending on the situation, and make the battle a quagmire," Zead said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"As part of such a strategy, a surprise attack on Paris is not an impossible tactic. If the sabotage of the Iberia Megafloat fails and the EC combined fleet is about to repel the USN fleet, it would be a very effective distraction tactic."

"But in reality, the EC and USN have already escaped from the state of war, and the USN fleet is moving towards Venezuela. There would be no benefit to the ZAFTRA military in launching a surprise attack on Paris in this situation," Colonel Telford pointed out, and Zead nodded a little gloomily.

"Objectively, that is true. However, it is possible that the Venezuelan Zaftra military no longer has the capacity to objectively assess the situation. If control from the home country was in order, there would be no problem, but if the execution of the operation is left to the judgment of the local commander, it is not uncommon for them to fall into the illusion that they can overcome a hopeless situation by carrying

out a desperate operation."

"...that's a tricky one," growled Colonel Telford, frowning.

"And has this possibility been pointed out to the people in Paris?"

"I told Undersecretary Allison when I handed him the documents about the Zaftra army. But the local French army and police are in charge of security at the EC parliament. I can't say for sure if they got that far," Zead replied, and I was startled to hear him. I don't know the details of how the French army's EC parliament security force is organized, but I can say for sure that they don't have any Wanzers. And the old-fashioned French army, only equipped with tanks and armored cars, would be no match for a Wanzer force unless there was a huge difference in numbers. Colonel Telford then spoke with a serious expression.

"Well, on the other hand, our going to Paris may unexpectedly strengthen our military strength. Of course, it would be best if nothing happens, but we should keep ourselves in a state where we can go into battle at any time."

"That's true. France's air defense system is by no means weak, and it's not like the Zaftra army has decided to move in the first place. I'd be happy if this turns out to be a needless worry, but I can't help but have a bad feeling about it," groaned Zead, and Colonel Telford nodded.

"Yeah. Your premonitions have always been good, especially when they're bad. You can't just ignore the bad premonitions of the Grim Reaper Zead."

"I'm just a coward. I'm nothing like some State Department doomsday prophet," Zead replied with a wry smile, but Colonel Telford retorted with a straight face.

"But from what I've seen, you and Deputy Secretary Allison seem to be a good team. Could it be that the reason we were called to Paris is because the Deputy Secretary, like you, had a bad feeling and decided to take action?"

"Hmm, I don't know about that," groaned Zead, his expression slightly sullen.

"In any case, let's hurry to Paris."

"I have a bad feeling about this, too," Deputy Secretary Allison said, with a complicated look on her face, as she welcomed us in Paris.

"But I can't call up the British Wanzer Corps just because I have a premonition. Whether there is an attack or not, doing so would be a disgrace to France, who is in charge of security. There is already a great deal of confusion over what to do about Germany, with opinions divided. I can't make things any more complicated. The best I could do was to get the First Airborne Corps and Durandal to come as observers."

"Yeah, I understand how troublesome the situation is," Zead nodded with a serious expression.

"By the way, as you may have already heard, I encountered Glaser at Kursk. I have a recording of his recollections, but I'll leave it up to you to decide what to do with it."

"It's a difficult question. Essentially, I think it will come down to the fact that Zaftra was the mastermind behind the conspiracy, and that Germany was complicit in it but also a victim at the same time. But Poland is determined to demand compensation from Germany. Spain and Portugal are also prepared to hold Germany responsible for Blauer Nebel's destruction of the Iberia Megafloat. For the time being France is neutral, but depending on how things develop, it's hard to say how things will turn out. In reality, it's next to impossible to get compensation from Zaftra, so there is a strong mood that they want to at least tighten the screws on Germany. I understand their feelings, but pursuing responsibility and demanding compensation within the EC is only going to deepen the rift between member states, so it's a fruitless effort. Negotiations with the USN regarding Madeira are still to come," Undersecretary Allison sighed heavily.

"If Zaftra really goes crazy and launches a surprise attack on Paris, it will become clear who the enemy is, and things may move forward faster. Also, if the EC members and the heads of state feel seriously in danger, it may bring them together a little."

"Well, I know what you're thinking, but..." Zead began, when Deputy Secretary Allison's handset started to ring.

"Excuse me for a moment," the Vice Minister declined, taking out his portable radio and holding it to his ear, but the next moment his expression suddenly became tense.

"Thank you for contacting us. We will deal with this as soon as possible," Deputy Director Allison said quickly and hung up the cell phone. She then looked at Zead and sighed.

"I've predicted another disaster. It seems that France's air defense network has been breached by a squadron of unidentified aircraft heading straight for Paris. Unless it's a mistaken identification, I think an official warning will be issued shortly, but I think it's most likely the Zaftra forces that flew in from Venezuela. If I may say so myself, I'm still a prophet of disaster."

"Well, if we can successfully weather this crisis, it may strengthen the EC's unity. At the very least, Durandal's reputation will increase," Zead replied reassuringly.

"We'll head back to the transport and set up the Wanzer. You'll have to accompany the Prime Minister, correct?"

"Yes. I'm truly sorry for calling you, who are not even part of the British military, and

getting you involved in such a troublesome situation, but I would appreciate your help. I wish you the best of luck," Deputy Secretary Allison said, and Zead responded sincerely.

"You too, please be careful."

"The French military will be responsible for dealing with the unidentified, suspicious aircraft and any suspicious Wanzers that have descended from it. If your Wanzers emerge, it will cause confusion, so please do not leave the transport aircraft," a young French officer claiming to be in charge of security at the EC parliament venue told Colonel Telford, who was already in his Wanzer, and he responded sarcastically as much as possible.

"You mean the French military doesn't have the ability to read the Wanzer's identification signal? If that's the case, I have no choice but to follow your orders because I don't want to be shot by my allies, but if the French military is wiped out, please contact me immediately. We have the right and the obligation to protect ourselves, our leaders and our parliamentarians. Even if you apologize later, it won't be worth a penny.

"...When we determine that your cooperation is necessary, we will request your cooperation at that time. Until then, I would like you to strictly refrain from any actions that may cause confusion. That's all," the French officer said in an exasperated tone and hung up the phone. Then, with a bitter smile, Gide said.

"Your words will only anger them. But if you don't anger them, the French will not soften up."

"A little pain would be a good medicine for the French, with their obsolete equipment and their useless pride," Colonel Telford remarked rather casually.

"Honestly, from my perspective, as long as the safety of Prime Minister Noland, Under Secretary Allison and his staff, and the British EC members of parliament can be ensured, then nothing else matters. The shelter in the parliament building is not something that could be breached even if one or two Wanzers crash into it, so barring an extremely unfortunate accident, the Prime Minister and the members of parliament should not be in danger. Also, if a Wanzer from the Zaftra army gets as far as this parking area, we will of course deploy, no matter what the French army says. There's no point in talking if we don't protect ourselves."

"That's natural, but are we really going to wait that long?" Colonel Telford responded as if it was obvious to Zead.

"Of course, if the French army requests our cooperation, we'll sortie right away. However, we can't go out without being called and have the panicked French tank

crew open fire on us just because a Wanzer has appeared. Also, I don't know how many Wanzers the Zaftra army has deployed, but they've brought them in by airborne transport planes, so it can't be an overwhelming number. It's possible that the French army alone can repel them."

"I wonder about that? Didn't the Zaftra military transport planes come in formation?"

As Zead asked suspiciously, a communication came in from the French military.

"This is the EC Congressional Security Headquarters. We are embarrassed to say this, but our French army and police ground forces have been overwhelmed by an unidentified vanguard force and have been forced into a situation where they are unable to complete their security duties at the EC Congressional Hall," a voice that sounded much older than the officer from earlier, possibly a colonel, or even a general, announced in a distressed voice.

"In this emergency, by the authority and responsibility of the Chief of EC Parliament Security, I am officially requesting the First Airborne Corps of the British Army and the Wanzer Unit of Durandal, the EC's land tactics research institute, to cooperate in the defense of the EC Parliament. I am truly sorry to have requested your cooperation, but the French ground forces will be temporarily withdrawing from the vicinity of the Parliament to avoid accidental fire and to allow the forces to regroup. An air force unit will arrive over Paris shortly, so I believe they will be able to provide some assistance, but I would like you to use your powers to defend the EC Parliament."

"The British First Airborne Corps has accepted a request for cooperation from the EC Parliament Security Headquarters. We will be dispatching immediately to defend the Parliament," Colonel Telford replied in a dignified voice. Zead then spoke in a solemn tone.

"This is the EC Land Tactical Research Institute Durandal, Tactical Research Division Vant'a Team. We have accepted a request for cooperation from the EC Assembly Hall Security Headquarters. We will do our utmost to defend the Assembly Hall."

"All right, let's go!" Beck shouted in an excited voice. This time it wasn't an airborne landing, but a launch from a landed transport plane, so Hermes and Beck were able to join without any problems. And, at the same time as they left the transport plane, Hermes, equipped with a high-performance sensor, reported in a tense tone.

"According to French military data, the estimated number of unidentified Wanzers is between 25 and 30. They are divided into two large groups, and are approaching the assembly hall from the south and west. This is a much larger force than we had

expected!"

"That means one group is about fifteen planes. That's not good. If we leave them alone and they launch a full-force attack, the shelter could be breached in an instant," Colonel Telford clicked his tongue, and Zead calmly made a suggestion.

"There is no other option than for the First Airborne Forces and Durandal to take separate action and each take on a group of enemies. Dividing forces by the side with fewer numbers is tactically a foolish plan, but it is unavoidable at this point."

"That's right. The First Airborne Force will attack the group to the south. Durandal, go around to the west. I wish you the best of luck." Saying this, Colonel Telford led his Wanzers south. Durandal continued straight west, and with its back to the EC parliament building, it came face to face with the mysterious Wanzer force, likely from the Zaftra army. However, there were fifteen of them and only six of ours. If they hit them head on, there would be no chance of winning. Before they got within missile engagement range, Zead gave orders.

"Beck, activate the system shutdown device!"

"All right!" came the spirited reply, and the device on Beck's back, with parts that looked like wings or petals sticking out on all four sides, emitted a low buzzing sound. Though we hadn't had a chance to use it on Kursk, the time had come to test the true worth of the system down device, which had been tailored to suit the Zaftra army's Wanzers. And, as we watched with bated breath, roughly half of the enemy Wanzers stopped moving on the spot. However, before we could think that it had been done, the enemy Wanzers that were still operational all advanced at once, firing missiles at Beck.

"Whoa!" A single missile would have been a threat enough, but the Beck machine was hit by a barrage of missiles from a total of seven Wanzers, and was destroyed without a moment's hesitation, the pilot ejected from the cockpit. At the same time, Zead shouted as he returned fire with missiles.

"All units charge! Most of the enemy Wanzers that are operational are equipped with missiles! Create a melee and strike them down before the effects of the system down wear off!"

"Roger that!" Latona's unit charged forward, slamming a pile bunker into the midsection of the missile-equipped Wanzer that was trying to move forward. My unit followed behind and was hit by a linked attack of shotgun shells, causing the missile-equipped unit to self-destruct, erupting in flames from its entire body.

"So they're Zaftra's suicide squad, after all!" Dodging, I mercilessly fired my machine gun at the second missile-equipped unit that hadn't been able to get in close

enough to attack. Bosch's unit then rushed in and fired both machine guns at once, destroying the third missile-equipped unit. Latona's unit then furiously pounced on the fourth missile-equipped unit, which had tried to retreat and create some distance, taking it down with a single hit from its pile bunker. Zead's missiles fired from the rear hit the fifth missile-equipped unit, which was half-destroyed, and Hermes' unit destroyed it. The sixth and seventh units, which were now reluctant to flee, were destroyed by Latona's and my units, who charged in and destroyed them with a linked attack, and the seven missile-equipped Wanzers that had advanced to attack Beck's unit were all destroyed before they had the time to launch any more missile attacks. However, perhaps because the system down device had been destroyed along with Beck's unit, the enemy Wanzers, which had stopped moving for a while, started to move again and attacked. Latona's unit, which had been pursuing the retreating missile-equipped unit, was hit by concentrated machine gun fire from four Wanzers that had suddenly started to move, and although it was able to block some of it with its shield, it received heavy damage to its legs. If two or more Wanzers were to attack simultaneously from different directions, it would be the same as a linked attack, and even Latona would not be able to dodge it all. However, she was not one to just let herself be defeated, and so she charged into one of the Wanzers that had fired its machine gun fire and pierced its torso with a pile bunker, killing it, but she was caught up in the enemy's self-destruction and its legs were completely immobilized. Meanwhile, of the remaining three Wanzers that had attacked Latona, I killed one with simultaneous machine gun and shotgun fire, and Bosch destroyed another with a machine gun. Hermes' unit carried out an additional attack and destroyed the remaining unit that had been hit by Zead's missiles. And so, four motionless Wanzers remained, but one of them seemed to have only managed to restore its self-destruct mechanism, as it was suddenly engulfed in flames and charred, while the other three were captured unharmed.

"Well, that's all sorted out," Zead asked in a careful tone as Hermes sighed deeply.

"About these three remaining units. Is there a possibility that the system will suddenly come back to life after this?"

"I don't know. I'd say it's a fifty-fifty chance," Hermes groaned, and Zead paused as if he were thinking for a moment, but then gave his orders.

"Okay. Hermes, you stay in the Wanzer and disarm these three units, and keep watch. There is a risk that their systems will be reactivated, but if we can capture them unharmed and avoid self-destruction, it will provide irrefutable evidence. However, don't try to open the hatches and pull the pilots out. Latona, you get off

the Wanzer, and cooperate with Hermes to keep watch over the three units. In particular, we're counting on you to deal with the situation if the pilots open the hatches and try to escape. Thank you for your cooperation. Beck, you return to the transport and take charge of whatever is convenient. "Please get in the Wanzer. If possible, I'd like you to bring landing gear parts to repair Latona's machine, but if you can't decide, prioritize bringing the Wanzer. Once you've brought the Wanzer quickly, ask for instructions from Latona or Hermes. Then Bosch, Elsa, you two will go with me to support the First Airborne Force. They are an elite unit, but they don't have any system down devices, and they don't have any machines equipped with link systems, nor any hybrid Wanzers equipped with missiles, so they're probably having a hard time."

"And there's the possibility of Wagner being there," Bosch muttered, glaring.

"According to Glaser, Wagner is loyal to Zaftra. After escaping the Iberia Megafloat, he will likely have joined the Madeira Island attack force, so there's a good chance he's here. He doesn't seem to be with our group, so he's probably over there."

"Well then, we'll need even more support," Zead growled in a bitter tone, before giving a command to the group.

"Latona, Hermes, Beck, please take care of this. Bosch, Elsa, follow me!"

"...As expected, they're having a hard time," groaned Zead, as if talking to himself, in a low voice as he went around to the south side of the EC assembly hall. The enemy group had been reduced to five units, but the remaining First Airborne Force consisted of only three, including Colonel Telford's commander unit. Furthermore, three of the remaining five enemy units were missile-equipped, attacking unilaterally from a long distance. Even if I thought I could close the distance and defeat them, the remaining two stood in my way like an iron wall, stubbornly not letting me close the distance. And one of the two units acting as the vanguard was a Schnecke Egel type. The other, whose model name I don't remember, was a large commander's Wanzer piloted by Major Wagner, equipped with large machine guns on both hands, which had completely destroyed my unit at Bassau. Of course, the aircraft that Wagner was piloting at the time was destroyed in attacks by Zead's and Latona's aircraft, so it was probably a different aircraft of the same type, but even so, I felt there was almost no doubt that the pilot was Wagner.

"Are they remnants of the Blauer Nebel?" Bosch glared at him with a bitter tone.

The Blauer Nebel, Germany's elite Wanzer unit, has now become synonymous with traitor. How many of the pilots who belonged to it escaped with Wagner on the Iberian Megafloat? And how many of them, like Wagner, were originally on the side

of Zaftra? Because the German army itself is in a state of chaos, the details are still unclear, but at least one person here is following Wagner and working with the Zaftra army to destroy the core of the EC. I suddenly wondered what Brigadier General Glaser, the founder of the Blauer Nebel who remained in Kursk, would say if he saw this scene. However, as if rejecting such sentimentality, Wagner's large Wanzer and the Egel-type Wanzer charged furiously toward the EC assembly building. The tactic was to advance the missile-equipped Wanzers in the rear and launch missile attacks on the surviving members of the First Airborne Forces, but the Wanzers looked so bold and ferocious that they looked as if they were going to charge straight into the parliament building. Then, we circled in from the west side of the building, and Zead's Wanzer, with Wagner's machine within striking distance, fired a missile without hesitation. In reality, if you want to destroy that monstrous large Wanzer, especially the vampire pilot Wagner, with minimal casualties, the only way is to fire missiles from a long distance. The Wagner machine, which had received the missiles, retreated with the Egel-type Wanzers, firing its large machine gun wildly. Bosch's and my machine avoided Wagner's machine and circled around from the side, aiming to directly attack the missile-equipped machine in the rear. At the same time, the three surviving Wanzers of the First Airborne Forces also carefully advanced. One of the missile-equipped planes took a somewhat reckless step forward and fired a missile at the Bosch plane. However, at that moment, the Bosch plane leapt into the air and hid in the shadow of a building. In the nick of time, the missile lost sight of its target, swerved far away, and crashed into the ground. "Did you dodge the missile?" I was stunned for a moment by the maneuver of the Bosch's machine, which overturned the common sense that missiles cannot be dodged, but it seemed that the enemy who fired the missile was astonished because it surpassed me. I quickly came to my senses and charged forward at full speed, bringing the missile-equipped machine within range, but the enemy Wanzer did not retreat, dodge, or attack, but simply stood there in shock. Of course, I did not hesitate to fire my machine gun and shotgun simultaneously, destroying the enemy missile-equipped machine. However, looking at it objectively, I had pushed forward too far alone in order to attack this missile-equipped machine. Since I was always paired with Latona's machine, I had a sense of security that no matter how far I went forward, she was still further ahead, but this time it was not the case. Then, Wagner's machine, which had retreated, immediately attacked my machine, which was now isolated and helpless. The first blow was quite far away, so I barely managed to dodge it, but it still missed me by a hair and caused considerable

damage to my torso. My movements had been perfectly read. Once again, I was convinced that this was definitely Wagner.

"There's no way I can dodge the next attack. What should I do? Should I try to kill each other again...?" Just as I was thinking this, a missile fired by Zead's machine hit Wagner's machine again. And at that moment, I jumped out before I could think.

"Go!" Without even looking at how the other side responded, I closed the distance and fired my machine gun and shotgun at the same time. At the same time, the Wagner machine also fired its large machine gun. It was a repeat of Bassau, but this time, it was my Wanzer that was standing when the firing ended. I don't really know how I won. The Wagner machine had received two direct hits from missiles before engaging me, so it may not have been functioning properly. In any case, the Wagner machine was completely stalled by my attack, and the pilot was ejected from the cockpit. That said, my Wanzer, although it had barely stopped functioning, had received significant damage to its torso and legs from a single hit from the large machine gun, and it was in a state where it would have stalled if I had made a poor move. Still, I tried to point my machine gun at the cockpit of the Wagner machine that had been ejected, but before I could do so, the Egel-type Wanzer opened fire with its machine gun from my left.

"Ahhhh!" With my legs in this state, there was no way to dodge. My Wanzer was standing still and was hit head on by the bullets. In an instant, all the displays turned a burning crimson and a harsh synthetic warning sound rang out from the headset.

"Emergency situation! Emergency situation! Ejection!"

"Tsk!" He thought for a moment, after he'd finally defeated Wagner, but there was nothing he could do about it now. Rather, he would have to worry about his cockpit being shot down by an Egel-type Wanzer after escaping. Even though the enemy was a Blauer Nebel and not the Zaftra army, he couldn't imagine that at this point they would be able to maintain the honor of not shooting the pilot of an escaping Wanzer.

"You've got to be kidding me! I can't stand dying here!" As the ejected cockpit landed on the ground with a heavy thud, I quickly removed my shock-resistant belt, unplugged the headset connection cord from the adapter, opened the hatch, and jumped out of the cockpit. However, there was no gunfire at the cockpit as I had expected, and even when I looked up, I couldn't see the Egel-type Wanzer. The sounds of the Wanzers fighting and the missiles flying thunderously filled the air, but the source of the sounds seemed strangely far away. In fact, I had no way of



knowing since I was in an ejection position, but just after I had fired at my unit and taken it down, the Egel-type Wanzer was surrounded and attacked by three Wanzers from the First Airborne Forces that had charged in from the front, and was desperately retreating despite being damaged to the point of being disabled. Of course, the Wanzers from the First Airborne Forces were running in pursuit to not let me escape, and I was completely left behind in the flow of the battle.

"We were saved... I wonder?" Feeling a mixture of relief and despair, I looked around. Suddenly, a tall man jumped out from behind the wreckage of the Wanzer.

"Don't move."

"...Wagner." Wagner pointed the handgun he was holding at me without a moment's hesitation. Staring at his inhumanly handsome face, I regretted my carelessness, but it was too late.

"There's no point in doing this. Your defeat has already been decided."

"Yes, I understand," Major Wagner nodded, without the slightest hint of agitation.

"In the sense that defeat was already certain, the moment we failed to destroy the Iberia Megafloat as planned, our defeat was already certain. The subsequent attack on the USN fleet and this attack on the EC assembly hall were, so to speak, merely our final desperate efforts. However, admitting defeat without exhausting all means may seem honorable, but it goes against my principles. As long as I am alive, I will continue to struggle to the end."

"What are you planning to do?" I asked, and Wagner answered calmly.

"You are a member of Durandal. And Durandal is a tight-knit group, which is hard to believe considering it is made up of a diverse group of nationalities. If we take you hostage, the other members won't let you die so easily," he said, looking a little suspicious as he continued.

"It is truly a mystery. Our plot certainly had many discrepancies and misfortunes, but in the end, it was thwarted by you Durandal. By the hands of a ragtag group with different nationalities, values, beliefs, and loyalties. Why?"

"That's true. The Zafra people believe that it's fine if all citizens look up to a single set of values equally, so that might not be what they understand." I answered Wagner's question, half intending to buy some time, but the other half being quite serious.

"The strength of us at Durandal is our diversity. Members of our team have different experiences, different values, and different ways of solving problems. If we each come up with solutions, even if one person hits a wall, someone else will find a hole in it, and someone else will find a way to go around it from the side. If everyone

could only think the same way, then once one person hits a wall, that's it, right?" "But diversity can also be a source of confusion, as in the current EC parliament," Wagner retorts in a serious tone. I thought he was being sarcastic, but it seems that's not the case.

"No matter how many different solutions you come up with, in most cases, there is only one that you can actually use. And since everyone will claim that their solution is the best, things get chaotic and stall before a solution can be implemented. But you Durandal, for some reason, managed to thwart our plans without causing any confusion or stalling. I'm sure it's not just diversity that makes you so strong."

"Other than diversity, I think it's about trust and respect among the members. If you recognize the other members as excellent people with abilities that clearly surpass yours in some areas, you won't make the ridiculous claim that the solution you present is always the best. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses, after all." After saying this, a thought suddenly occurred to me. This Wagner man had the outstanding ability to deal with any situation, so perhaps he didn't need to acknowledge others. However, judging from Wagner's reaction to my words, this didn't seem to be the case. He was dazzled, with a smile that could be taken as admiration.

"Trust and respect for each other. I certainly had a few people who were worthy of trust and respect. However, I had to assume a different name and identity from a young age, and lived undercover in a foreign country, so I was not allowed to present myself as worthy of trust and respect to those people. I do not regret the life I dedicated to the Great Zaftra Republic. However, I can only say that it was unfortunate that I was not able to show my true self to those who I wanted to be friends with. I was a person who wore a mask from birth, destined to betray the people around me who were worthy of trust and respect. If that had not been the case, what kind of life would I have had?"

"Wagner..." Feeling a deep emotion that was neither pity nor grief, I dazzled. And at that moment, a Wanzel with machine guns in both hands ran past us at high speed. The model was the same Tatoo... Bosch model as my downed machine!

"Bosch!" I shouted, forgetting that no one could possibly hear me. When Wagner heard my name, I thought for a moment that his expression had become very complicated, but that might have just been my imagination. And in the next moment, a missile that had been fired from afar at Bosch's aircraft lost sight of its target, went astray, and exploded on impact with the ground.

"Oh no!" I instinctively ducked down and clutched my head. Just in the nick of time,

a blast of heat and blast wind roared past overhead. I was saved because I happened to be in the shade of something, but I was so far away that it would not have been surprising if I had been blown away head-on. Then, when the aftereffects of the explosion subsided and I cautiously raised my head and looked around, Wagner was nowhere to be seen.

Epilogue – Durandal Headquarters

"In the end, will it all be concluded that the Zaftra politicians, military personnel, and bureaucrats who were ousted in this coup were to blame?" I asked, a little dissatisfied, as I glanced over at the newspaper headlines about a large-scale coup in the Republic of Zaftra.

"Even if we blame it on mistakes made by the previous administration or the military going out of control, I don't think the country can escape responsibility."

"That's true. But neither the EC nor the USN can tighten the screws on Zaftra to the point where it explodes again. They're a strong nation militarily, even without plotting underhanded schemes," Latona replied, sipping tea.

"Even though the elections have brought about a change of government in Germany, it will likely take some time for things to settle down."

"Ah, that's true. For now, it seems they're focusing on uncovering Zaftra's spy network, but that alone won't be a fundamental solution," Bosch nodded with a complicated look on his face.

"Instead of trying to build up its strength on its own, Germany needs to think about strengthening the defense capabilities of the entire EC. Otherwise, Germany will continue to be wary of Germany. It's not going to be easy."

"It's extremely difficult for countries to maintain cooperation," Latona said, shrugging.

"Especially when it comes to a large organization like EC."

"But I think the strength of the EC system is that nations cooperate with each other on an equal footing, no matter how difficult it may be. If there is a powerful core and the rest of the world is simply pulled along by the core's will, then it's no different from the USN or Zaftra." I was dazzled as I recalled the conversation I had had on the battlefield with Wagner, whose life or death is still unknown.

"Even in this Durandal, people from completely different positions cooperate and achieve results while making use of their individuality. I don't think that what can be done between people can't be done between countries."

"Yes, that's true," said Bosch, laughing softly.

"We, Durandal, are the model case that EC should aim for."

"I mean, since Hermes and I are also part of it, there's no need to limit it to EC, right?" Latona smiled and looked around at us. If the world could cooperate on an equal footing, including the USN and Zafra, I'm sure it would be a much more comfortable place to live in than it is now. Just like this cozy Durandal break room."

"In that case, we really want a member from OCU," said Bosch, shining a light, and then Beck came in.

"Hey, are you all here?! News, news! A new member has been announced to join Arrow 7!" Latona asked as Beck was talking excitedly.

"Is that from OCU?"

"Yes, that's right. What, you knew?" he asked in confusion, to which Latona replied with a laugh.

"That's not the case, but we were talking about how if we were to have a new member, it would be from OCU."

"Oh, I see. But this guy looks like he'll be an immediate asset. He's from OCU Australia, and apparently he participated in the Huffman conflict as a mercenary." Beck had probably only just heard about it. He happily shared the information. Latona nodded, her smile turning a little fiercer.

"I see. Well then, we'll have to gather all the members who are available to greet them. If there are only two of us, we might get killed in return."

"Well, I don't really care about the outcome of the mock battle, but as a former OCU mercenary, he might have some unique tactics. I'm starting to get a bit interested," Bosch said with amusement. So I sighed and shrugged.

"If you're going to challenge the new members to a mock battle right after you arrive, you should talk to Zead about it first. I absolutely don't want to be made to clean the temporary toilets as punishment."

"Yeah! I completely agree with that! If we're going to have a mock battle, let's do it properly after laying the groundwork, not on a whim that might result in punishment! Let's do that!" Beck exclaimed, perhaps remembering a bitter experience from before. Then Latona spoke with a wry smile.

"If I were to propose a mock battle, Zead might think I'm bullying a newbie and reject it. Elsa, could you please sort it out for me? "

"Yes, that's fine," I nodded, got up from my seat, and headed to the central control room. I was looking forward to seeing who my new teammate would be.

FIN

Akitsu Toru Akitsu

Born February 16, 1960 in Tokyo. Graduated from the School of Literature at Waseda University. Debuted in 1988 with "Majuu Senshi Luna Varga." Utilizing his highly original writing style, he has written many popular series. His main works include "Majuu Senki Neo Varga" (Kadokawa Sneaker Bunko), "Harpuia Funsenki" (Haruki Bunko), "Houkago Uchuusen" and "Kanki Fuunroku" (Famitsu Bunko).

<http://homepage3.nifty.com/akitsushima/>

GAME NOVELS

Front Mission 4 II

~Elsa #2~

October 15, 2004 First edition, first printing

originalWork ♦ PS2 software "Front Mission 4"

©2003 SQUARE ENIX CO., LTD. All Rights Reserved.

CHARACTER DESIGN: YUSUKE NAORA

Author person ♦ Akitsu Toru

Issuer ♦ Koji Taguchi

Publisher ♦ Square Enix Co., Ltd.

〒151-8544

3-22-7 Yoyogi, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Shinjuku Bunka Quinto Building 3rd floor

Sales Business 03(5333)0832

Book Editing 03(5333)0879

Printing company ♦ Kato Plate Printing Co., Ltd.

Any misprinted or missing pages will be replaced.

The price is shown on the cover.

©2004 Toru Akitsu

2004 SQUARE ENIX

Printed in Japan

ISBN4-7575-1290-2 C0293